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COMPLIMENTARY

Being and Nothingness of Poetry

Heather C. White

On October 22, former Poet Laureate Mark Strand read a number of his poems at The Community School of Music and Arts in downtown Ithaca. Strand lives in Salt Lake City, and teaches at the University of Iowa. He publishes regularly in a number of national magazines, including *The New Yorker*, where his work has appeared for many years. Strand read a few poems from his last collection, *The Continuous Life*, and a number of cantos from his new, long poem *Dark Harbor*, which will be published in the spring. Listening to the

reading I was reminded of the special pleasure of hearing poetry, especially unfamiliar poetry, read aloud. Because it is certain from the outset that the listener will remember only a small part of the poems' content or language she is freed to experience the poems wholly as they are in the moment, rather than as they are after many readings and concentrated thought. In this way, hearing a poem can also be a new experience of a poem one knows well. The fun of poetry is its position on the border of two experiences of language, written and spoken, and the differences between its place in each, differences which one must experience to understand. In particular, readings tend to reveal a poem's humor in a way that reading it on a page may not. This seems especially true of Strand's poetry, which is balanced delicately between darkness, profundity, and absurdity. The poems of *Dark Harbor* are noteworthy in this respect, in that they often leave the reader equally delighted and haunted, and with good reason to wonder whether the image in question is funny or very, very sad. I called Strand at his home in Salt Lake City to talk about his beginnings as a painter, his time as Poet Laureate, and his new book.

HW: Let's start with a little bit about your background. I know you studied painting at Yale before switching to poetry.

MS: Yes. While I was a painter I always read poetry, and always considered myself a little too verbal to be a painter; also, I wasn't a very good painter.

HW: What do you mean by "too verbal" for a painter?

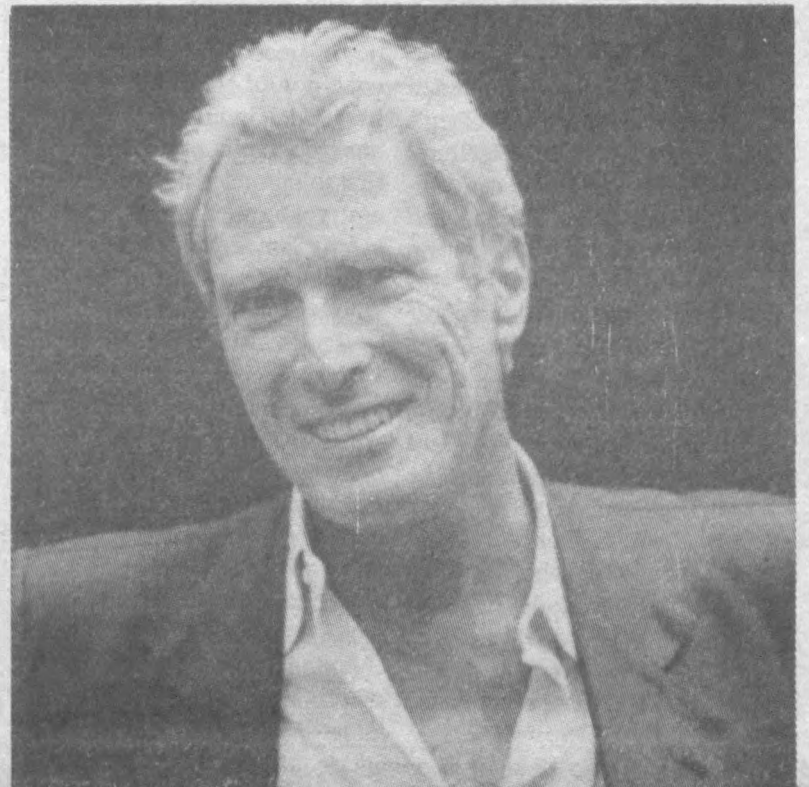
MS: I tended to talk a lot; painters work silently and think about painting, but I spent a lot of time thinking about talking about painting.

HW: Do you think there's some connection between the language of painting and the language of poetry?

MS: No, there's no connection. There's no connection between any of the art forms. Painting is carried out in an entirely different way. Painting is made up of visual ideas and sometimes they never surface verbally, whereas writing is all verbal, the ideas are generated by language, not by what's seen.

HW: Then the difference is in how ideas are generated? There's a lot of visual imagery in poems.

MS: I think whatever ideas you have as a painter are mediated by paint, and whatever ideas you have as a poet are generated by language;



Photograph: Denise Eagleson

Mark Strand

they come out of the way we use language. Think of it this way: is there anything verbal about painting? There's something visual about poetry in that you read it, it's printed. Sometimes it will describe a scene or an event and that may become a picture in the mind of the reader, but very often it's not a picture in the

mind of the reader. It exists from beginning to end as an abstraction. The kind of recognition that we experience when reading is not absolutely literal; when you read a novel you don't recreate or have a graphic sense of the rooms you're in. Even when you read Dickens, you sort of see *Poetry*, page 14

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Paul Caponigro
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Out of the Ashes

Marc Novak

YOUNG MEN AND FIRE

Norman Maclean

The University of Chicago Press
\$19.95, 301 pp.

With the current financial and critical success of the film adaptation, it is somewhat ironic that Norman Maclean had difficulty finding a publisher for his first book, *A River Runs Through It*. On the surface, the title story concerns two young men, their minister father, and their shared love of fly-fishing—hardly the stuff of publishers' dreams. It did not help that Maclean was starting his writing career at the age of 70, after having retired from his position as William Rainey Harper Professor of English at the University of Chicago. As he had no earlier writing credits, publishers dismissed these "western" stories—one remarking on the unsuitability of the manuscript that "These stories have trees in them."

The University of Chicago Press eventually published the

book. The title story was then recognized for it was: a remarkable eulogy for the American West and a passionate meditation on nature, the mysteries of family, the erosions of time, and the reclaiming power of art. It was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Young Men and Fire is as much about fighting forest fires as "A River" was about fly-fishing. Maclean chose for his subject the great Mann Gulch forest fire of 1949 in which 13 smokejumpers—members of the elite Forest Service airborne firefighters—were killed. He started *Young Men and Fire* at the age of 74 and it became his obsession for the last 13 years of his life. He painstakingly pieced together newspaper accounts, Forest Service inquiries, interviews with two survivors of the fire and his own on-site observations 30-40 years after the disaster. When he died in 1990 he still considered the work unfinished. The manuscript had expanded from a mere rendering of detail to an investigation of faith, the uses of storytelling, and

Job's questions about suffering. His editor at the University of Chicago Press maintained Maclean's story structure but pruned his voluminous notes to its finished book form.

The title *Young Men and Fire* evokes a Greek tragedy of unfulfilled life cut short by inevitabilities. This is certainly elemental writing. In "A River" Maclean was haunted by waters, and here he elaborates on forest fires; the ether from which the smokejumpers come and the suffocating fire gases which killed them; and the earth of the desperate reaches and far places of the West.

The bones of the story are these: On the afternoon of August 15, 1949, a small forest fire was spotted in the Gates of the Mountain Wilderness Area in western Montana. A crew of smokejumpers left base and 15 parachuted into an area called Mann Gulch. The smokejumpers hoped to dig a line around the fire and get quickly back to the bars for beer and women—besides firefighting, the only other preoccupations of the young men

see *Ashes*, page 6

Worming Through the Big Apple

Gunilla Feigenbaum

Here in New York City the Reagan-Bush era didn't end with the bang of the election, but with the whimper of a slow scale-down and fadeout. When Bush took office, the famous "thousand points of light" were understood to mean so many sequins on an evening gown or the limousine headlights heading home from Wall Street on a winter's night. (Where did those sequins go? Are there huge bags of glitter on the ocean floor? Are they being mixed into the cement used to repave the sidewalks on the upper East Side? Those sidewalks are conspicuously sparkly—I'm not kidding.) People who even last year wouldn't dream of transporting themselves from a lunch at Eat on 80th and Madison Avenue to the Whitney Museum, five blocks south, without the comfort of their own leather-upholstered Lincoln Town Car backseat, and the reverent company of their chauffeur, announce proudly that they "let

Frank go" and are taking cabs. (Eat incidentally, is the quintessential Reagan-era lunch place. They invented the nine-dollar salad that features two leaves of radicchio, garnished with an unknown vegetable that looks like a cat whisker, drenched in passion fruit vinegar.)

I'm not saying that these people are taking the subway—it's still impossible to dress for both a museum opening and the subway without being shunned in one place and attacked in the other. But taking a taxi is a definite scale-down, especially since no New York cabbies speak English anymore, or know where anything in Manhattan is located, and they all have beastly little scented cardboard pine trees known as "Car Fresheners" dangling from the rear-view mirror. "Scented" doesn't adequately describe the effect. After such a ride, you need to douse your fur coat with tomato juice. Anyone who's witnessed the meeting of a dog and a skunk knows

see *NYC*, page 4

The Master Without His Laurel On

Cushing Strout

HENRY JAMES: THE IMAGINATION OF GENIUS
by Fred Kaplan
William Morrow
\$25.00, 620 pp.

Henry James, as Fred Kaplan remarks, was fascinated with orphanhood, ever since he overheard *David Copperfield* being read aloud. Yet James himself seems nowadays something of a literary orphan. I had him on my syllabi for forty years, but it is hard to see what place for him there would be today according to the current categories for studying literature to which entering graduate students at Cornell are officially introduced: Women's Writing; American Multicultural Studies; Deconstruction; Post-colonial Literatures; Gay, Lesbian, and Bixexual Studies. He is not only a dead white male, but he was thoroughly "Eurocentric," a frequent traveler in France and Italy, capable of waxing nostalgic about "the old sweet Anglo-Saxon spell," and unapologetically elitist about art. Nothing could be more unfashionable.

Nowadays we like our writers classified and pigeonholed by sex and ethnicity; and pundits of lit crit are suspicious of terms like "genius" in a way that F.W. Dupee was not in 1951 when he wrote in the first biography of Henry James: "the powers that finally distinguished him, the eloquence and energy and subtlety, belong rather to undifferentiated genius than to either sex." Fred Kaplan's subtitle *The Imagination of Genius* might suggest a biography along the lines of Dupee's book, which is distinguished not only by its elegant trimness of size but also for its judicious and insightful treatment of James's fiction. But Kaplan instead seems to have recognized implicitly that the current cards are stacked against James — unless one can look at him, as has been done, through the eyes of a fashionable French theorist like Foucault, or find some other angle that is congenial to contemporary literary prejudices.

Kaplan thinks he has found one by announcing on his jacket-flap

that his is the first biography to be written "in the light of late twentieth-century attitudes towards feminism and homosexuality." The claim is much exaggerated. Dupee, for instance, noted that there is a sense in which James might be called "the great feminine novelist of a feminine age in letters." Dupee pointed out that James "was able, without being at all doctrinaire about it, to imagine women, not as a distinct species with peculiar problems, as they had nearly always been presented by novelists, but as typical of human possibilities in general. In their relatively greater freedom from material pressures they figured for him the pleasures and responsibilities of freedom in whatever sex or condition of society." Moreover, Leon Edel, in his baggier five-volume biography of James, was the first to introduce the reader to several young men about whom the elderly James expressed passionate feelings of friendship, deeply tinged with homoerotic feeling.

James insisted that "to criticize is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession," but with Kaplan the appropriation is too often an expropriation for his insistent theme that "retreat from overt sexuality" is "central to James's life and work, one of the hidden sources of dramatic power and obsession." Nor is this a new theme about James. Edmund Wilson in 1938 thought there was something "incomplete" about James's emotional life, for in much of his work "there are no consummated love affairs" and when they do appear, they do so "in a queer and left-handed way" because "they are seen from a distance." Wilson left the problem unexplained; Kaplan supplies an explanation: inhibited homosexuality.

Kaplan makes it clear that James shared many conventional Victorian attitudes about "the love that has no name." He was far less at home with the idea of homosexuality than either E.M. Forster or W. H. Auden (literary heroes of my youth), who actually practiced it, though without the contemporary flaunting or ideologizing of sexual preference. Moreover, James himself sometimes gives the impression in his fiction of having a prurient curiosity about the private life of others, but the biogra-

pher who wants to make retreat from overt sexuality "central to James's life and work" must also himself sometimes appear to be prying in the same way. We have to wonder if it isn't the biographer and not the novelist who is unable "to get it out of his mind or his stories."

It may be, for example, that when James dined with Edith Wharton and her bisexual lover Morton Fullerton, they "dined, so to speak, in the anteroom of the lovers' passion," but if James "knew that he had come as close as he ever would to holding Fullerton in his own arms," it is Kaplan here who is the ventrilo-

liam James. Shortly before, the novelist had burned his papers in an unsuccessful attempt to protect his privacy from peering biographers.

The problematic nature of biography is not a matter of Victorian prudery. It is a general problem, which Nathaniel Hawthorne saw long before there were any psychoanalytically curious biographers. Hawthorne remarked after visiting Stratford that "the Shakespeare whom I met there took various guises but had not his laurel on." What biography too often tends to do is to insist that great men are "very often the same kind of men as the rest of

need to take account of "perishing earthliness." But Erikson's model has had the merit of preserving the heroic status of his subjects, whether of Martin Luther or Mohandas Gandhi. The biographer must not obscure the merits and the value of the writings that made the writer important in the first place and therefore a pertinent subject for scrutiny.

Fortunately, Kaplan is much too responsible a biographer to jam his subject completely into the pigeonholes defined by his jacket-flap. He writes some four hundred pages before he pays considerable attention to James's homoerotic friendships. The work that put James on my syllabi and in my books was responsive to other concerns, which are deeply implicated, for example, in his experience as an American living abroad, with all its rich material for what he called "the international theme" of the bewildered American encountering Europe. Kaplan rightly says that the three major novels of his last period (like his short story "The Jolly Corner" and his memoir *The American Scene*) represent "a culmination of his concern with the international theme," which had guided him so well when he first made his reputation as a novelist. One of the strengths of the book is Kaplan's concern for documenting his subject's response to economic, political, and military matters, and it has the effect of undercutting the conventional image of James as an affluent Tory (mainly a matter of what Dupee called his "flagrant decorum" in manners) and of linking him instead to the liberalism of his brother William.

This biography skimps, however, on the James that is profoundly absorbed with questions of technique and with the work of his fellow artists, past and present, especially including Hawthorne, Howells, Balzac, and Turgenev. One would never know from Kaplan that *The Bostonians* is a rewriting of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, as *The Ambassadors* is a revision of Howells' *Indian Summer*. Kaplan always manages to find, however improbably, some hidden reflection of James's family

see *Master*, page 12



Illustration: Milly Acharya

quist, throwing his voice into his subject's head.

When Henry Adams sent a copy of his autobiographical memoir to the novelist, he advised him: "take your own in the same way in order to prevent biographers from taking it in theirs." James took the advice in two volumes of a tremulous, impressionistic journey down the stream of his consciousness, at a time when he was stricken by the death of his remaining blood-relative, his "ideal Elder Brother," Wil-

us, and often a little worse." When Shakespeare invoked a curse on those who would "stir his bones, he perhaps meant the largest share of it for those who would pry into his perishing earthliness." No one, as the saying goes, is a hero to his valet, but that is the trouble with being a valet.

As a historian who has written biographically in the light of Erik Erikson's ego-psychology about American writers, including three of the Jameses, I fully accept the

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see page 15 for Buffalo locations

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Land is Religion

Ruth Yarrow

When I think back on the State of Indian America Conference sponsored by Cornell University's American Indian Program on October 8-10, 1992, two words keep coming to mind: "people" and "sacred." Since the conference was held almost exactly five hundred years after Columbus' arrival, I expected to come away from it weighed down with the devastation of indigenous peoples to which that encounter led. While no one avoided the history — described by conference organizer and editor-in-chief of Cornell's Akwe:kong Press, Jose Barreiro, as "ugly history, scandalously cruel" — I left the conference deeply moved by the dignity and strength of purpose of the speakers who represented a wide diversity of indigenous cultures throughout the hemisphere.

As I entered the initial press conference on Thursday morning, Calixto Nukuan, an Aguaruna Indian from Amazonian Peru, was at the microphone representing a confederation of native tribes in the seven countries of the Amazon basin. He rejected the Quincentenary as a celebration, seeing these recent centuries as a time of genocide. Nukuan's solemnity seemed to reflect the weight of this long oppression; however, he did not focus in bitterness on the past but on the future. As he put it, "We are not here to be studied, but to work together to solve problems."

As other conference presenters spoke of their "people," I sensed that in contrast to our culture's focus on the present generation, their use of the word included past and future generations. A young Wintu mother from northern California, Caleen Sisk-Franco, spoke forcefully about the present: "We are here because racism is alive and well." But she also frequently quoted the warnings of her grandmother, that Mother Earth will react against abuse. As she prefaced her remarks with the phrase "Grandmother says," it was clear that quoting her grandmother lent an authority to her words that she as a young person could not yet claim. Referring to the next generation (while handling her baby with such calm that the baby's cheerful exploration of the podium became a

focal point for many cameras), Sisk-Franco wondered if her daughter would be able to take part, as she had when she was fourteen, in a traditional coming-of-age ceremony at a spring on Mount Shasta, in a wilderness area now threatened by a tourist ski development. Ironically, one reason the US Government refuses to recognize Wintu claims to the area is that no signs of previous human disturbance have been found on the mountain. As Sisk-Franco noted, however, the reason for this is perfectly clear: the Wintu left no sign of disturbance because the mountain is sacred.

Marilyn Harris, a Hopi elder from Second Mesa, epitomized the concept of the earth as sacred with her statement that "Land is religion." When I spoke to her later, she described the ongoing struggle of the Hopi to protect the water sources of their mesas. The Peabody Coal Company is slurring coal with part of the pristine aquifer that underlies the Hopi nation. For over nine centuries the Hopi have depended on this water and the amazingly deep-rooted Hopi corn for nourishment on the dry mesas. Now, for the first time, some of the Hopi springs are drying up, and it is generally acknowledged that Peabody's slurry operations are making an impact on the aquifer.

What threatens traditional cultures, stated Winnebago elder and former tribal chairman Reuben Snake — who introduced himself with a smile as "your humble serpent" — is the narrow logic which prevails in our technocratic society. Sacredness has been taken from the earth, he said, because in attempting to control it, we have lost respect for

it. Last year Snake asked the International Union of Geophysicists what they thought could be done about global pollution problems. The scientists responded that they saw no conventional economic solution, and agreed that only a change in attitude could preserve the environment. Snake quoted an Indian saying: "If we don't change direction, we will end up where we are headed."

Jose Barreiro described a survey he conducted of American In-

native people of the Americas. The declaration concludes: "We hereby issue a pledge of respect for the indigenous cultures and nations of the Americas, grand contributors to modern civilization, whose continued existence provides hope that our common humanity will find ways to live in harmony with our Mother Earth." Further, Barreiro noted that 1993 will be the United Nations' International Year of Indigenous Peoples. When asked whether he

thought the European response to the Quincentenary, following the lead of the Spain '92 Foundation, was superior to the US response, Barreiro commented that it is always easier for countries without indigenous peoples to be supportive — noting the long romantic tradition in depicting the high plains Indians in Holland, Germany, and Japan. But he feels that current global multicultural and environmental concerns are helping the world to more fully understand Native American perspectives on the relationship between human societies and the environment.

On Friday, speakers from California, Arizona, Minnesota, New York, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru described their legal, economic, and cultural struggles against hostile dominant societies. Billy Frank, Jr., who represents the natural resource rights of twenty tribes in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, described how the Nisqually tribe effectively used their treaty with the US Government to stop President Bush from allowing oil wells to be drilled off the coast of Washington state. Well-known Native

American author and attorney, Vine Deloria, Jr., warned of the danger when the federal government interprets a case that deals with one tribe as affecting all other tribes, thus potentially restricting their rights. He urged each tribe to remember that there is no standard federal Indian law applicable to all tribes, but that the government should deal singly with each tribe and its unique history and treaty.

The accounts of Native American struggles resonated with my experience in other peace and social justice campaigns, but I felt an additional strength here. Perhaps I can best describe it as a depth of caring for people, and taking the time to appreciate them as individuals. During lunch, Ron LaFrance, Director of the American Indian Program at Cornell, spoke about "our students" in a way that made clear that he is not the usual administrator who mostly focuses on the growing numbers in the program. Rather, he cares enough to find out that one student was so low on money that she had gone without food for four days, or to understand another who wanted to spend the winter back on the reservation helping his grandparents. This same attitude was evident in the conference on Saturday when a panel on women's concerns continued over the allotted time.

The women on the panel were leaders among their people who have contended with a wide spectrum of oppression. Amalia Dixon, a Miskito community organizer in Nicaragua, told of having to deal with dramatic changes in her country's government, and Katsi Cook, a Mohawk midwife and community health researcher, described the extent and effects of industrial pollution on her people's food supply. Caleen Sisk-Franco spoke of giving men back their importance by expecting their participation. And she noted that when alcoholism intrudes, Indian women have started to demand that men "become responsible for their part in completing the family circle."

Where do non-Native Americans fit into this struggle to preserve cultures in the face of development and exploitation? Our first task, according to Reuben Snake, is to scrutinize our own relation to the

see *Land*, page 10



Caleen Sisk-Franco and her grandmother

dian peoples across the hemisphere on how the Quincentennial should be celebrated. The dominant response was that Native Americans need to educate the rest of the world about their heritage. There are indications that this message is beginning to be heard. Barreiro reported that the Spain 1992 Foundation, representing Spain's international program, is issuing a "Declaration of Respect for Indigenous American Cultures" to support the survival of

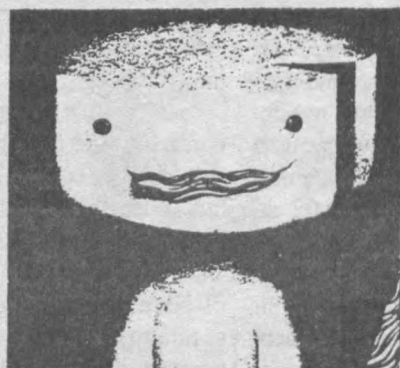
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Off Campus At The Bookery

The "Off Campus at the Bookery" lecture series continued last month with a reading by
Dr. Peter W. Nathanielsz
from his recent book
Life Before Birth and A Time to Be Born.

December 6



Alison Lurie

will give a talk on "Good and Bad Children's Books. Her newest book is *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (1990). Her novels include *Foreign Affairs* and *The Truth about Lorin Jones*.

February 7



Photograph: Pat Roberts

John Vernon

will read from his third novel *Peter Doyle* and give a talk on the new style of historical fiction. Vernon is a professor of English at Binghamton University.

February 21



Pietro Pucci

professor of classics at Cornell, will give a lecture on how modern critical thought envisions and reacts to Sophocles's *Oedipus*. His recently published book is entitled *Oedipus and the Fabrication of the Father*.

March 14

Gail Holst-Warhaft

will talk on her just-published book entitled *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature*. Holst-Warhaft is a lecturer in classics and comparative literature at Cornell University.

All events are held Sundays at 4 p.m.
in Bookery II's new lecture space.

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NYC

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what I'm talking about. (Tsk, tsk, don't tell me about fur coats and animal rights. On the upper East Side animal rights means your pug's right to wear galoshes on a rainy day and PC still stands for personal computer.)

Trickle-down economics brought a recession to the middle class and the poor and it has finally trickled up to the top layer. Even people who probably aren't hurting at all are reluctant to display their wealth too ostentatiously. Parties look funereal — everyone is wearing black. It doesn't take much to imagine that people are in deep mourning over the good old days.

The question, "Did he do it?", referring to Woody Allen, the favorite New York icon, has given way to "Did you see it?", meaning the Matisse exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. If you answer yes, the rejoinder is not a discussion about Art, but the inquiry: "Which party did you go to?" One leftover of the Reagan era is throwing private parties in public spaces. For a very large contribution to a museum, you'll be allowed to stage an event in the midst of the Etruscan vases. You can bring in caterers, tables and chairs, champagne and — yes! — ashtrays. The guards, who during normal working hours beat up people who carry umbrellas and bite anyone who stands too close to a painting, will benignly smile as you drop duck liver paté on the Warhol. During such a party you can enjoy the Matisse show in peace and quiet, sipping your Moët et Chandon.

Otherwise, you have to go to the Museum of Modern Art sometime between ten and five, stand in line for forty minutes plunk down twelve-fifty a ticket, and return some three weeks later on a specific day at a specific half-hour. In a crowd of six thousand you may then catch a fleeting glance of the paintings as they appear behind a thick wall of art lovers wearing headphones. The exhibit takes place on two floors. You may not return to the first floor after entering the second. I haven't been and I don't intend to go, much as I love Matisse (or because I love Matisse). The Gauguin exhibition last year was bad enough.

If you want to see the paintings, buy the book. All the museums turn out publications from their shows, and their gift shops are growing much faster than their art collections. The reader may detect a sour note here. Museums used to be free, and they used to look like museums, not department stores. The Metropolitan is in principle free. They suggest a contribution of six dollars for an adult but no one is allowed to spit on you if you only give them a quarter. Once you've gotten past the slight sneer of the ticket-booth attendant who gives you the little clip-on tag, no one can tell the difference between you and the paying customers. All of the museums cost six or seven dollars and it seems to me that poor people don't go to museums any-

more. Even at the Metropolitan, it takes some chutzpah not to pay.

Once you're inside, you discover that the curators are the same people who remodeled Bloomingdale's this year to look like the Pyramid mall. (In Bloomingdales you can't find a selection for, say, blouses anymore because they are scattered throughout the store by designer name. The most expensive blouses are on the fourth floor, the cheapest ones are on the second, and everything in between is on the third, stuck in here and there among suits and skirts and lycra dresses. In other words, you can never a) find the blouses, or b) try on a selection in one dressing room for comparison.) The art at the Metropolitan has over the past (Reagan) decade been arranged according to "designer." If you're looking for Caravaggio, you may



Illustration: Irving Mink

find him in "the collection of Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So" and "the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Such-and-Such" (in a completely different part of the museum) and any or all of another half dozen places.

To add insult to injury, chances are very good that you won't get to see what you came for at all, because the museum now closes its galleries half the day on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays on alternating days. Try and figure out what that means.

The only part of the Metropolitan that has consistently enlarged and improved is the shopping area which has spread like a fungus to gobble up several floors and even sprouted a little offshoot on Rockefeller Plaza. Yet, something about it all has to be working because on a Sunday afternoon the Metropolitan is as crowded as Grand Central Station during rush hour. But for the museum-goer who associates museums with peace and spacious silence, I recommend the Frick Collection, on 5th Avenue and 70th Street. You pay an entrance fee, but you can actually see the paintings and there is no gift shop at all. There is also the Center for African Art, on 68th and Park Avenue, which shows lovely African pieces in small, intimate rooms, usually only sparsely attended. (The gift shop is a couple of book racks by the entrance).

Of course, most people who come into the city this time of the year are not coming to see the art, but to do their holiday shopping. From now until Christmas, 5th Avenue will look like the inauguration of Nicholas II and draw as many spectators, some of whom are apparently able and willing to pay the price of a Fabergé egg for a pair of bunny slippers. Ordinary New Yorkers (and by ordinary I mean those who worry about their rent) don't go there — they go where the

bargains are. You'll see them on Times Square pricing electronics, on Canal Street buying watches, and at Daffy's and Century 21, checking the (sometimes missing) clothing labels, all bargain hunting with the tenacity of pigs digging for truffles. If you don't know what I'm talking about, here then is my insider's guide.

Daffy's has two stores in Manhattan, one on Madison and 44th Street which is so awful I won't go into details. The other one is located at 111 5th Avenue, at the corner of 18th Street. It has three floors of men's, women's, and children's clothing, some gift items like watches and "executive toys" (what else do you call things like desk golf putters?) and accessories. The reductions are generally between 40% and 75%, except for shoes which are no serious bargain here. Men's clothing tends to run on the funky

European side, beehive shirts and clown pants, but if that's what you're into, this is the place to go. The women's selection is much better, everything from American designer sportswear to some lower-end Italian fashions. Ladies, wear underwear, preferably clean! If you try anything on, you'll be sharing the dressing room with thirty

other women. For men, there is only one dressing room, so instead of being scrutinized in your skivvies, you get to stand on line. Either sex, expect no help from sales people, they are not there to help you, they are there to prevent you from stealing the stuff and they won't hesitate to tell you so. Don't even mention having something held for you for half an hour. They'll brand you on the forehead to make sure you never enter the store again. If you decide to buy something you'll stand on line by a counter for a very long time. They take Mastercard and VISA and — if you have more ID's than would fit in a medium-size suitcase — a personal check.

Century 21 is at 22 Cortland Street, across the street from the World Trade Center, half a block west of Broadway. There is a sign at the entrance reading "No one under 17 allowed without the company of an adult." Why? Your guess is as good as mine. It should read "No Lifeguard on Duty." This is a department store with everything — clothes, shoes, accessories, beauty products, home appliances, sheets, and towels, etc. It's absolutely jammed — this is not genteel atmosphere. However, the bargains are spectacular. The men's department has \$80 shirts for \$30 and \$30 shirts for \$11.99, and so on. The sales people won't help you with anything, but there are lots of counters for paying. Shoes are dirt cheap. Women's and children's clothes are on the second floor. There are no dressing rooms at all. You want it or you don't want it? So move on, already!

Under a rickety sign reading "Italian Designer," Century 21 has a small section with truly impressive designer's clothes — Versace, Genny, Valentino, Montana, reduced from the thousands to between \$50 and \$400. This is how it works:

see NYC, page 16

Hanging the Artist

Steve Poleski

JAMES ENSOR & PAUL WEST
Secret Museums #5
Flohic Editions
\$15.00, 80 pp.

As I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania that had no art museum, my education in art was confined to the shelves of the local library. In a space of time now remembered as a flash, I read all the art books, and that was the only art history course I have ever had. Now, considerably older, I am like the snow-blinded traveler who searches for the horizon in a whiteness that once had meaning. The once-treasured art books seem like mere palimpsests, their texts erased by the whims of fashion. What then is the purpose of the art book in an age of impermanence, when artists are pitched and then pithed, their reputations made and dismantled within a single year?

Many books in the art category seem to be designed to be sold by the pound, their prime function being to serve as expensive weights to keep even more costly coffee tables from levitating. Costly to produce, they are usually sold for a high price when first released, but lacking any real information, they rapidly find their way to the remainder counter.

Another type of art book is instigated by the artist or dealer to establish a reputation. The purpose here is not to sell books, but to use books to sell artworks. A

well-known art critic is usually paid to hype the artist's work, in the hope that this will impress collectors. Unfortunately, the scam usually works; these books are flogged in museum gift shops and carefully catalogued by university libraries, and the carnival becomes history.

A different approach to art books is taken in a new series from France published by Flohic Editions. In *Secret Museums*, a known novelist is invited to comment freely on the work of a historically recognized artist. Neither art critics nor specialists, these authors provide uniquely different perspectives on the familiar images reproduced in the various books of the series.

Flohic Editions, located in Paris, is the emanation of the French publication *Ninety*, an *au courant* magazine of the art market known in the previous decade by the name of *Eighty*. With *Secret Museums*, Flohic Editions hopes to become an international publishing house, printing the volumes simultaneously in five languages. The books are produced in soft cover with a folded

wrapper, and are printed in Belgium on heavy-weight glossy stock. The photo-reproductions are of the highest standards, giving the books a look of quality.

Defining itself as a pedagogical series, *Secret Museums* includes an elaborate chronological account of

Ensor & Paul West. In this book the artworks are reproduced on the right-hand pages, while on the left-hand pages the author's text is presented as a facsimile of the page of a novel. According to the publisher, this concept is "intended to give to the thought of the novelist all of its

power and its autonomy, and to encourage the reader to read the text." Unfortunately, the designer of the series chose to have the text printed on a shadowed cream rectangle in the middle of the page. Thus, while the artwork remains firmly on the page, the text seems to be projecting self-consciously forward, creating an illu-

sion of visual clutter.

The text by Paul West is a legato performance by an author considered by some to be the finest living stylist writing in English. Not one to take a scholar's approach (he castigates scholars in the essay), West assumes that Ensor's perceptions were the same as his own. West, the writer of the 20th century, becomes Ensor the artist of the 19th. Dealing with the devil in the details, West tiptoes along the razor-edge of the

abyss that is Ensor's life, experiencing the horror that comes with the sense that you are obliged to create even when your work is ignored. Denied access to his own generation, Ensor abandoned himself to his introspection and produced works for the future. According to West, Ensor's sense of place was a fiction defined by the avoidance of his own history.

Discussing the painting, "Maskers Arguing over a Hanged Man," West inquires, "Have we here another worthless quarrel, with an ironical imputation of the life-force to the shrew, or something wholly different? Might the quarrel be over the hanged man on the ground, not the one still suspended? Or do we have an eclectic little replica of life...?"

West's basic tenet is that careful questioning by someone from an unrelated discipline can reveal fresh insights. Art and literature become not the flawless agent of beauty, but the distorting intermediary for doubt. In the flux and chaos of Ensor's art, West sees "the capacity of life for disintegration." He reminds us that, like characters in an Ensor painting, "we live in a perilous world which at any moment can go from brilliant swirling color to cosmic black." In the end, says West, the muse that moved James Ensor "was no lady, but a paramour of the continuum" — the same muse that moves Paul West.

✦

Steve Poleski is a writer who lives in Ithaca, NY.



Maskers Arguing over a Hanged Man

the artist at the end of each work. For the reader coming from an art-world background, this material is not really necessary for such artists as El Greco, Goya, and Giacometti. On the other hand, more information would have been welcome about the writers, for example Fernando Arrabal and Pascal Quignard, whose work may not be familiar to the art community.

The most recent publication in the *Secret Museums* series is James

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Ashes

continued from page 1
that summer. But as Maclean writes: "They were still so young they hadn't learned to count the odds and to sense they might owe the universe a tragedy."

The jumpers landed near the top of the gulch. They arranged their gear and headed to meet the fire. Around 5:45 p.m. they had advanced enough to determine the constitution of the fire. Strong winds and exceedingly dry conditions had greatly urged the fire's growth. The foreman, "Wag" Dodge, saw that his small crew would be inadequate to control the fire's now sprawling heat and intensity. He ordered an immediate retreat. The next 15 minutes the men raced upslope for their lives. The strong updraft off the Missouri River at the bottom of the gulch, and the heat of the fire which sucked oxygen to itself, turned the gulch into a huge chimney.

When it became apparent to Dodge that his young men could not reach the safety of the ridge he lit what has come to be known as an escape fire in the tall hillside grass. His idea was to burn a patch of hillside ahead of the main fire and quickly dive into the cooling ashes and let the larger fire pass around this buffer zone. Dodge lit the fire and ordered his men to follow him into it. But the crew, terrified by the main fire now only a hundred feet behind them, either did not hear or heed his orders. They did not believe another fire could save them from the monstrous heat already pursuing them. They continued their reckless, disorderly retreat up the slope.

Dodge dove into the ashes and covered his face with a wet handkerchief, saving himself. The rest of the crew ran for the ridge 200 yards above them. "When it comes to racing with death," Maclean writes, "not all men are created equal." Three thousand acres (4 3/4 square miles) burned in a little over 15 minutes. Thirteen of the jumpers were

consumed by the fire or were so badly burned they did not survive the next day. Maclean writes that he approached this "catastrophe that we hoped would not end where it began, it might go on and become a story....(one of) young men who did not leave much behind them and needed someone to remember them." It is a story Maclean spent his whole life preparing to tell.

Son of a Presbyterian minister, he spent his teenage years as a logger and a Forest Service lookout, and in summer worked fire crew duty. But he left Montana for a distinguished teaching career as a professor of English at the University of Chicago, but he maintained the temperament of a backwoods sage. Maclean understood the frames of Greek, Shakespearean, and Biblical tragedies, and spent his career in the company of young men who were the age of those who died in the Mann Gulch fire. He even visited the fire site a few weeks after the disaster, while the trees still cracked and shattered from the explosive gases of the fires smoldering in their pith.

Maclean was intimate with both the land and the characters who inhabited it. He fixes them in spare and vivid writing. Dodge, the self-reliant fire foreman, was a man whose "brain couldn't work unless his hands were busy." Able to improvise an escape fire which might

have saved his crew, but with an impoverished sense of verbal expression and his crew's character, he was unable to convey his plan in the terrible rushing seconds preceding death. Robert Jansson, the meticulous ranger who ordered the smokejumpers in and later retrieved their corpses, is described as suf-

struggle between mountains and plains come face-to-face"; and the mountain goats are "tougher than the mountains they disdain, although at a distance they are white wings of butterflies floating up and down and sideways across the fragments of arches and cliffs; touching but never becoming attached to them." These are passages of aching beauty which beg to be read aloud.

A slight criticism of the book is Maclean's occasional obsession with details. He is so incredibly knowledgeable about the history of the Forest Service and the geography of his boyhood home Montana, and spent so much time with fire researchers creating mathematical models of forest fires, that facts and background occasionally slow the narrative. Yet he is presenting us with a complex world, a history involved as much with dust as with glory, so his enthusiasm for detail may be excused.

Preeminently, Maclean is trying to make sense of these young men's gratuitous deaths and answer the question: What sort of universe is this anyway? Early on, one of the smokejumpers remarks that he wouldn't jump from an airplane "if it were empty out there." Of course, every skydiver steps into an awesome emptiness of sky. Maclean transforms this step into a metaphorical leap of faith toward consolation. For himself, the answer resides in a belief in

shape and design, salvation through understanding, and the storyteller's art.

"A River Runs Through It" begins with the famous line: "In my family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." In *Young Men and Fire* Maclean couples the severe Presbyterian God of his childhood with a storyteller's extension of compassion to answer suffering. In so doing, catastrophe becomes tragedy, a purgative explanation of mysteries.

As Maclean, in his eighties, walked the Mann Gulch site 35 years after the disaster, he carried with him a backpack full of notes and documents on the fire. He struggled up the same steep slope the young men ascended, painstakingly reaching from clump to clump of dry grass. By reliving and retelling their lives he cobbled together a consolation to their and his own approaching death. At the end of the book, at the end of his life, he wrote:

I, an old man, have written this fire report. Among other things, it was important to me, as an exercise for old age, to enlarge my knowledge and spirit so I could accompany young men whose lives I might have lived on their way to death. I have climbed where they have climbed, and in my time I have fought fire and inquired into its nature. In addition, I have lived to get a better understanding of myself and those close to me, many of them now dead.

Maclean became ill and died before he considered his search complete. But he kept himself erect long enough to provide it a meaningful shape. Who reads this book—and we should read this book—touches several lives and will see the world as a less empty place.

Marc Novak is a writer who lives in Ithaca, NY.

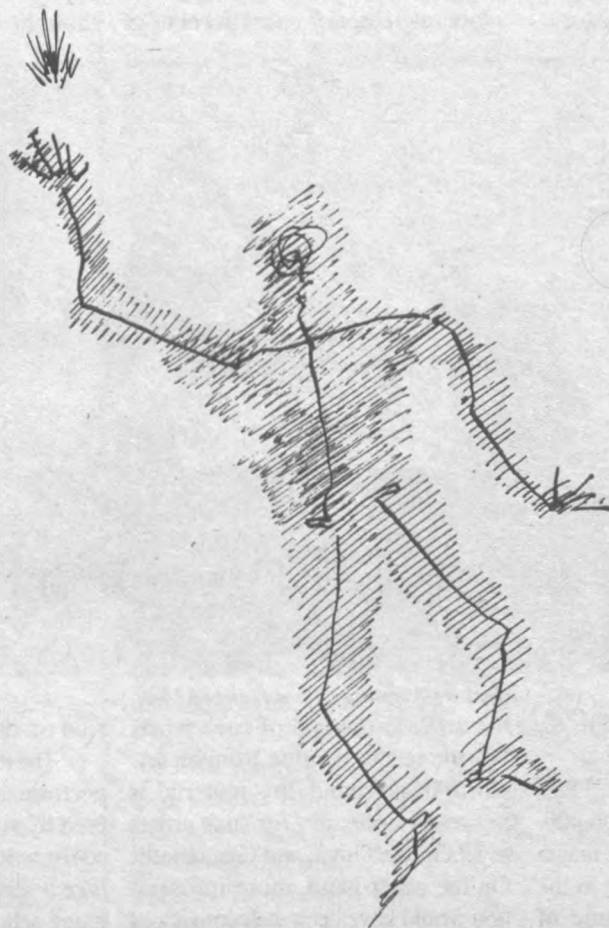


Illustration: Joanna Sheldon

fering such guilt that Maclean writes "it got so he could not sleep at night remembering the smell of it, and his dog would no longer come in but cried all night outside, knowing that something had gone wrong with him."

Maclean's love and knowledge of the land is all-encompassing, like those full rainbows seen out west which run from horizon to horizon. Mann Gulch is a place where "the

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Western Perplexities

Robert Rebein

NOTHING BUT BLUE SKIES

Thomas McGuane
Houghton Mifflin / Seymour
Lawrence \$21.95, 349 pp.

Thomas McGuane's latest novel begins with a sentence that, for all its whacked-out charm, is as tough to chew as old boot-leather:

In 1968, a now ancient time full of scathing situations, trying love but preferring lust and, for many, one meretricious scène à faire, the flushing of narcotics down the toilet, Frank was banished from the family business by his father.

In their October excerpt from the novel, McGuane's fellow editors at *Esquire* add a hyphen after "now" and a comma after "time"; but I can't see that it makes much difference. The sentence is still a McGuane enigma, and it announces the reader's entrance into one of his better novels.

One begins such novels as one rumbles skyward in a DC-10; with that curious feeling in the groin that things are not quite under control. Remember that wonderful first paragraph of *Panama* (1978)? "This is the first time I've worked without a net." Or the cool, cowboy opening of *Nobody's Angel* (1982)? "You would have to care about the country." In a McGuane world, we are always more or less along for the ride; anything could happen. It is nothing to hear the bolts rattling and the wings about to peel back.

At his best, Thomas McGuane has always mixed a roguish delight in antics (the ever-impending *scène à faire*) with a prose style that is both precise and full of acrobatic surprise. Where a William Gass is heavy, McGuane is tough; where a Raymond Carver is safe, McGuane takes chances. The fact is, McGuane is no longer simply a talented young voice, what *Vintage Contemporaries* editor Gary Fisketjon once called a "smart ass at large." At age fifty-three and with ten books behind him, he must now be reckoned one of our better older novelists.

Esquire calls *Nothing But Blue Skies* "McGuane's most ambitious work to date," and if length is any indication, it certainly is that.

Few of McGuane's previous novels have broken the 200-page barrier (a length the author himself has called the perfect "power-to-weight" ratio for contemporary fiction). *Nothing But Blue Skies* weighs in at 349 pages, and like a chubby Roberto Duran, it loses some power by doing so.

Does that mean it is a bad novel in the same way that Duran, these days, is such an embarrassment to boxing and to his former selves? Not by any means. In fact, *Nothing But Blue Skies* is easily McGuane's best book since *Nobody's Angel*.

Lately I've decided that each McGuane reader finds his heart in a different McGuane book, some preferring the early mixture of Hemingway and Kerouac in novels

usually (well, always) involving a McGuane guy and his wrestling match with 1) the woman who won't fit the dream, 2) the dream that won't fit the woman, 3) the drugs and/or sour mash bourbon that won't leave him be, and 4) the father who never understood that these problems are serious and not just the tomfoolery of a no-account son.

In the early books, McGuane's heroes were all rich kids on a tear: out of control, usually out of luck, and yet also, inevitably, questing for a unique American vision in a culture of middle-class automatons. As McGuane's career matured and his characters, by necessity, got older, he had to come up with different excuses for their "antics." No longer were they merely young and crazy. They were lonely

woman does not fit the dream; neither does the dream fit the woman: the antics and the bourbon, one senses, are just around the corner.

When I was growing up in Dodge City, Kansas, the biggest thing a boy could imagine becoming—besides President of the United States or quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys—was a certain kind of speculator in live cattle. With his John B. Stetson on his head, the skins of elephants and ostriches on his booted feet, the Cattle Buyer looked incredibly tall alongside your typical dirt farmer or straw-hatted herdsman. I had some weird hope, beginning this novel, that Frank Copenhaver would somehow prove to be my first encounter in fiction with this elusive ghost of my childhood. But McGuane is less

despair, the desperate antics—McGuane has hung an aroma of nostalgia for that "now ancient" time, the 1960s. For anyone born after, say, the Eisenhower administration, this is a strange and not altogether welcome development.

In truth, the sixties in California were for Frank a time when everyone "seemed surrounded by quotation marks":

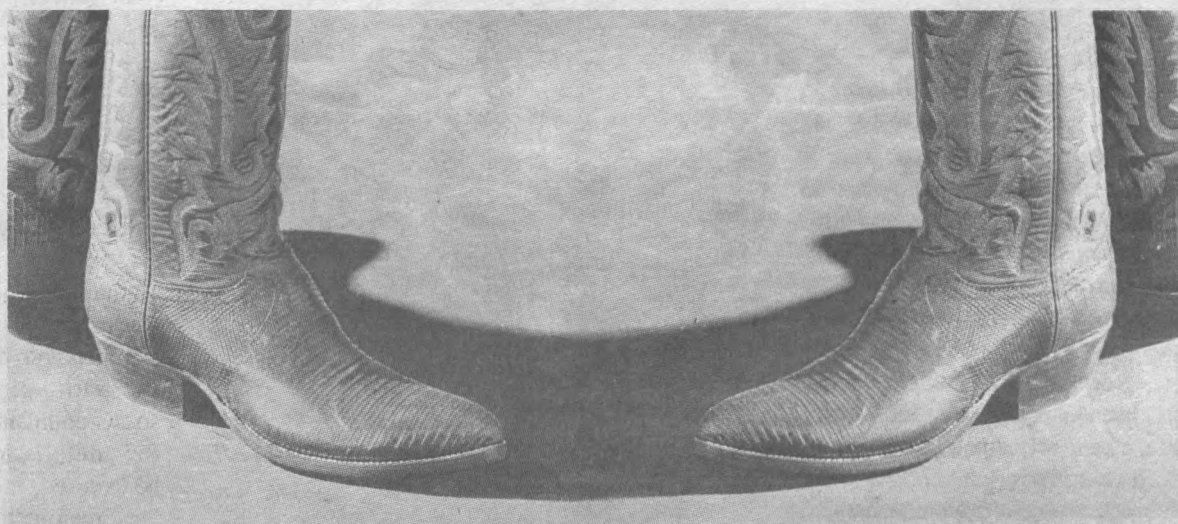
It was sex en masse. It got monotonous and lasted one year, one month and nineteen days. He was out of there like a kerosened cat.

Far from having been a real hippie, Frank was one of those who quickly learned how to cash in on the trend. Upon leaving California, he goes to work for a crew that drifts around the country ransacking old ranches and farmhouses for those special items needed to add "atmosphere" to West Coast salad bars and steak joints. It is on just such an expedition to Louisiana that Frank meets Gracie. And yet, with Gracie gone now and business going badly, Frank can't help looking back to the glory days.

Odd hours took him back to the days of weirdness, to the exhilaration of being out of step. He went on contemplating the way the world was reabsorbing him and his friends, terrified people coming to resemble their parents, their dogs, their country, their seatmates, after a pretty good spell of resembling only themselves. This, thought Frank, lacks tragic dimensions almost as certainly as podiatry does. But it holds me in a certain ache to imagine I'm actually as much of a businessman as my father.

One can't help wondering, reading this, if it does not in fact represent the faux-tragic dimensions of many people one knows. Certain professors, for example. Yet what saves it, at least for those of us who can't remember 1968, is that one clear admission, "lacks tragic dimensions." McGuane's character knows that the glory of his sixties experience is all in remembrance. The novel comes close at times, but we are not finally asked to believe that life after Woodstock is somehow shabby and meaningless in a way the sixties weren't.

see *Western*, page 10



Photograph: Kathy Morris

like *The Bushwhacked Piano* (1971) or *Ninety-Two in the Shade* (1973), which was nominated for a National Book Award, others the strict minimalism and dark humor of *Panama* or *Nobody's Angel*, still others the little postage stamp of native soil McGuane's been working since he adopted Montana and the New West genre. I know one old guy (a rancher and part-time rodeo clown) who cares only for *An Outside Chance* (1980), McGuane's book of essays on sport. "Read 'Roping, from A to B' or 'Angling Versus Acts of God'," he says. "You'll never go back to that made-up crap."

Like so many of Hemingway's books, a McGuane novel will typically offer a few different things à la carte rather than one big main course. To begin with, there's that "made-up crap," the signature McGuane plot or storyline,

and lost, between relationships, desperately searching for themselves in a world left empty by their now-departed fathers.

Thus if the early books were about lighting out for the territory, the middle books, beginning with *Panama* and including *Keep the Change* (1989), were about returning to the home ground, the home place—the family ranch or business—and finding that it is no easy matter filling the old man's shoes.

Nothing But Blue Skies announces a new period and a slightly different protagonist than we've seen heretofore. The book concerns a middle-aged hippie turned businessman, Frank Copenhaver, who awakes one Montana morning to discover that he has earned a life far wealthier than his father's, but has also in the process lost his wife Gracie who made it all make sense. The

interested in drawing a certain Western type than he is in depicting what has become of his own generation in the West.

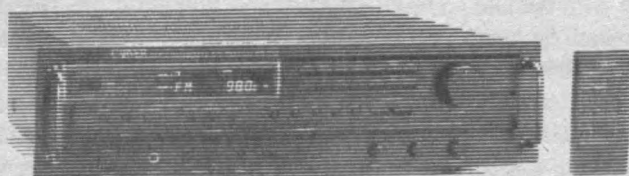
In the wake of his wife's departure, Copenhaver begins the typical McGuanian downward slide. He speculates wildly in the cattle market, losing big; he loudmouths himself out of friends, employees, and tenants, losing more; finally, through a combination of boozing and half-hearted lust, he comes close to losing the respect of his college-aged daughter, and so very nearly loses all. The antics are wild but also a little tired. At one point, in battle for a woman he doesn't even want, Frank drunkenly spears a cowboy's pickup with the forks of a front-end loader. A seventeen-year-old farm kid might pass this off as "ornery," but as the act of an aging man, it is little short of desperate.

Over all of this—the loss, the

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— Paul Caponigro

Jill Hartz

Once there was a Tantric Buddhism master who gave his disciple this task — to visualize in all its attributes a particular bodhisattva and to be able to call forth this visualization at will. Years passed and the disciple returned to acknowledge his success. The master complimented the student and set a second task — to make the visualization move and follow the student everywhere. Years passed and at last, with the deed accomplished, the student returned. The master seemed pleased with the student's progress but set a more difficult task — to make the bodhisattva visible to others, a talking, breathing entity. Again, years passed and the disciple returned with his creation, surely a great accomplishment. But the lesson was not done. For his final task, the master told the student to get rid of his creation.

After looking at the photographs of Paul Caponigro, currently on view at the Cornell University Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, and reading selected writings by the artist, this story sprang to my mind. Caponigro, like the student of tantric arts, is a versatile practitioner of his medium, photography, and in particular, the silver print. His technical knowledge and ability are thorough, broad-based, and everywhere evident in his work. But his photographs cannot be understood or appreciated solely through an explanation of technique or

philosophy. Nor is the creation of a beautiful or accurate likeness of some aspect of the world sufficient to the artist's purpose. Rather, they are the critical points of departure into the unknown, the unseen — a gateway, or as Caponigro calls it, "a meeting place" between the eternal and the momentary:

To penetrate and record, even if only reflectively through an idea-image, that which takes place in, over, under, around, and through nature, is to feel the intangible, the somewhere in between the what is and the what I am, the interaction between visible and invisible. This is what I look for — what I am interested in. I am concerned with what grows out of interaction.

Born in 1932, Paul Caponigro has been taking pictures most of his life. The nearly one hundred small-scale, black-and-white prints in the Johnson Museum exhibition, entitled "The Voice of the Print," range over thirty years of the artist's work and articulate his relationship with the varied aspects of nature, from her visible manifestations—seasons, climates, panoramas, and bounty — to her mysterious workings and our spiritual connection with the universe. Exquisitely printed, the images convey nature's varied moods: the crisp clarity of a fresh snowfall in the Northeast, the paradoxically barren and sensuous terrain of the desert Southwest, and the anthropomorphic and mystical qualities of

ancient monoliths in Europe. Others uncover the celestial richness of an apple or pear, the abstract patterns of a building facade, the solitude and sadness of a child's doll.

The earliest work in the exhibition, created circa 1955, presents the facade of a Roman Catholic church in Revere, Massachusetts. Caponigro did in fact earn a living for some years photographing architectural sites in Boston, and this work dates from that period. Yet, even here nature intrudes. A small flowering tree, bathed in light, stands solidly in the foreground, offsetting the impenetrable brickwork of the rising church. The most recent works, taken and printed in 1989, offer two vistas of Europe — a flax field in Belgium, where row

moment. Thus he demonstrated that the release from anxiety and the cessation of overly mechanical actions at the keyboard could allow for other possibilities...in the making of music.

During one of Caponigro's last visits to his teacher, Fondacaro gave a memorable instruction: "Music," he said, "should be made from here," indicating his heart. In photography, too, Caponigro has tried to attain that "state of heart, a gentle space offering inspirational substance that could purify one's vision. Photography, like music, must be born in the unmanifest world of spirit. Still, despite the numerous correspondences between the two art forms, Caponigro recognized a

following an exhibition of his work at the Carl Siembab Gallery in Boston, attended by Adams and a group of Polaroid executives, Caponigro was hired as a consultant by Polaroid to test the technical effectiveness of its products, an appointment that lasted for years and allowed him to give up commercial work. Although he admits that despite his technical ability, he is sometimes unable to account for his images, he adds, "Yet, 'unless technique and materials are seriously investigated and experienced, I see that moving statements are seldom made.' Only when the techniques are second-nature to the photographer can they be forgotten or transcended.

The Johnson Museum exhibition is consequently both about



Sunflower, Winthrop, Massachusetts, 1965

At times I make photographs for the sheer magic of the process and the good feeling about the very stuff needed: light, chemical combinations, some imperceptible forces at work behind the scene. I am intrigued with it always. I am a part of the dream which takes the guise of photography.

on row of harvested flax travels diagonally across the plane, and an olive tree in Italy, whose lyrical stance beckons us flirtatiously.

The element of lyricism, which recurs in myriad natural forms throughout the exhibition, also connects Caponigro to his other artistic pursuit, music. As a child, Caponigro was drawn equally to photography and music, and was encouraged by his parents to study both. After high school, he enrolled in Boston University's College of Music to study piano but left a year later, realizing that he wanted the music without the academics. Instead, he began studying piano with the late Alfredo Fondacaro, which he continued until his teacher's death.

Caponigro was quick to transfer lessons gained in one medium to the other. While Fondacaro drilled him in technique, the teacher expected more:

On occasion he would stop the lesson in progress and bring to my notice a particularly good sound or a musical phrase that carried a fine understanding. If there was a magical element in the sound brought forth, he would sometimes terminate the lesson entirely and send me away to ponder and digest that rare

crucial difference. Unlike the musician, the photographer depends on images from the outside world.

Caponigro's search for the eternal in the momentary click of the shutter connects him to a tradition of photography exemplified by Ansel Adams, Alfred Stieglitz, and Minor White. In his writings he refers humorously to his studies of the Zone System and the Zen System, the former referring to Ansel Adams' technical guidelines, the latter to Minor White's basis for his philosophy about life and art. From Stieglitz, he learned to examine the photograph as "equivalent." John Szarkowski, former director at the Photography Department of the Museum of Modern Art, in the introduction to his exhibition catalogue *Mirrors and Windows*, defines the term as "a feeling that for unstated reasons some picture is decidedly significant to you." For Caponigro, equivalence followed "from simple receptivity and wholeheartedness of action rather than from either using a premeditated approach or trying too hard to achieve the desired effect."

While technique has never been Caponigro's prime concern, it is clearly always at the service of his personal vision. In the late 1950s,

"seeing" and about the papers, developers, and methods required to put image on paper. Based on Caponigro's efforts to teach photographic printing to his students and "my own attempts to nudge the boundaries of standard photographic techniques within the medium of the silver print," *The Voice of the Print* is divided into three sections: the first offers pairs of prints with identical images printed on different papers with varying developer chemicals; the second presents pairs of unrelated images that offer potential relationships; and the third features single images to be studied for differences in print color, tonality, and emotional content. Included also are the dates when the images were shot and when they were printed. While some of the works are vintage (e.g., taken and printed in 1955) others may have been printed from 20-year-old negatives.

Caponigro encourages the viewer to approach the exhibition in a spirit of receptivity and heightened awareness. He writes:

It is my hope that the viewer might see the potential of experiencing the photograph not only as a record, nor as a means of psychological
see *Light*, page 9



Egg Rock, Nahant, Massachusetts, 1958

Most of us tend to take things too literally by way of sense and learned identification. I want to get at another aspect of experiencing, to see beyond the image, behind appearance. Taking things too literally stands in the way of this — like a veil.

Light

continued from page 8

probing, but as a tool to activate the deeper imagination.... Allow the voice of the print to speak to you by seeing the tonalities as areas of feeling, quietly or vigorously interacting and functioning as more than mere translations of light reflecting from the surfaces of objects.

Although unwelcome at the time, Caponigro credits his induction into the army in 1953 with his development as a serious photographer. Admitted into the army band, Caponigro was sent to San Francisco, where the bandleader, hearing of Caponigro's photography background, sent him to the Sixth Army photo lab, where he met Benjamin Chin. The two shared a love of music and photography and soon Chin was initiating Caponigro into the technical aspects of Adams' Zone System. Chin later introduced the young photographer to many of the West Coast photographers, who were reacting against the pictorialist influence on the field. Caponigro met Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, and Minor White, who, Chin advised, could teach him how to look at image content as personal expression and how to photograph something "not only for what it is, but for what else it is."

A few years later, Caponigro accompanied White on his workshops in California and Oregon, where he taught students how to "read" photographs, and later studied with him in Rochester, where he



Rock Wall, West Hartford, Connecticut, 1959

Inner correspondences to the outer shapes and physical events provide me with a magical bridge to link the seemingly separated places and spaces of man and earth

was given his first solo exhibition at the George Eastman House, entitled "In the Presence Of . . .". White, as the founder of *Aperture*, published Caponigro's 1967 monograph. *Aperture*, noted Szarkowski, "reflected values that had grown out of the American tradition of Alfred Stieglitz and enlarged by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams: A love for the eloquently perfect print, an

intense sensitivity to the mystical content of the natural landscape, a belief in the existence of a universal formal language, and a minimal interest in man as a social animal." Although Caponigro eventually rejected dogma of any kind as an impediment to his work, he recognized White's influence and importance:

For White, the achievement of

harmony between oneself and the outside world was more important than any one approach or particular technique. By presenting the photographic ideals of other photographers, namely Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, in conjunction with various acknowledged methods for transcendence, White tried to move himself and others along the path to a more spiritually charged

photography and a sense of personal fulfillment.

For over thirty years, Caponigro has attempted to capture the mystical presence of nature in his images. From White's Zen System, he turned to the ideas of G. I. Gurdjieff, who also emphasized spiritual harmony and heightened consciousness, and came to see art as a "sacred business" which "comes to the individual who will put himself in a state to let the imagery manifest itself." To achieve that state, Caponigro subscribes to an environment of calm and inner stillness, which sharpens the mind and the artist's sensitivity. "My wish," he writes, "is to partake of the 'hush' experienced on first glimpse of the Unicorn in the wood. The stuff of mythology and the substance of earth's atmosphere are of the intangible. The magic brought forth by such images as the Unicorn is also available in that solid place we refer to as the real world. It is my conviction that the earth and all its manifestations contains this magic."



Jill Hartz is director of public relations and publications at Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum.

"The Voice of the Print: Photographs by Caponigro" is on view at the Johnson Museum through December 20, and has been made possible with the generous support of Diann and Thomas Mann and the Cornell Council of the Creative and Performing Arts.

Absent Fathers

Bridget Meeds

BLAMING ICARUS

by Eric Machan Howd
Crane Press, Ithaca, NY
\$3.00, 8 pp.

"[Icarus] fell . . . but/what if he dove . . .?" asks poet Eric Machan Howd in his recently self-published chapbook *Blaming Icarus*. Indeed, what if Icarus did dive? And what if he still exists today, hiding in a trailer park with his lover Elvis Presley? In his first chapbook, Howd deftly uses the myth of Icarus, combined with icons of our culture and personal recollection, to explore issues of maleness. He focuses on father/son relationships.

The Icarus myth is well-known. Icarus and his father Daedalus were imprisoned in Crete. Daedalus, a brilliant maze-maker and engineer, designed wings made of feathers and wax for their escape. He cautioned Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, because the wings would melt. Icarus, as the story goes, was young and excited, and foolishly soared near the sun. His wings melted, he fell into the sea, and drowned. Daedalus flew on and escaped to Sicily, where he was welcomed.

Howd, a young father and teacher, uses this myth as a springboard for ruminations on contemporary men's issues. Bittersweet father/son relationships run throughout the anthology. "In The Beginning" uses falling images to describe Lucifer being cast down from his father and home in heaven. "Ever after / leaves loosened / from branches / rain/ slipped / from clouds . . ." In the world of this poem, as the son is cast away from father, all weep.

This strong kinesthetic sense is apparent in another father/son poem, "Daedalus." In this, the narrator first describes Michelangelo's famous Sistine Chapel painting in which "God / reaches towards Adam and does not / touch. . . / and their faces remain indifferent." This sense of reaching and not touching, effort without connection, is reiterated later in the poem when the narrator, referring to Daedalus, asks:

How could a man who designed
an unsolvable maze and beeswax wings

accept that same void
when his son fell?
Not even to attempt to dive
after him, touch his hand, pluck a feather
just to say he tried, he tried...

Howd's grasp of language is admirable, his diction interestingly simple. Almost always his understanding of the role of line breaks in free verse is good and adds to the meaning of his work.

The unreachable father appears again and again in *Blaming Icarus*. In the short prose piece "Shingling," the narrator describes shingling roofs with his father on long summer days. The father is skilled and teaches his son things like "how to drive a ten-penny nail in two swings without splitting the shingle." However, the father, whose "face would drop to work," teaches the narrator other, perhaps less useful skills. The narrator learns stoicism as well. "I hit my fingers one time while looking up at clouds," he says, "and secretly I dropped a tear before my hammer and watched it roll down to the gutter with all the nails he dropped." Instead of conversation, the two share "the dryness of work in our mouths." At the end of the day, once descended to ground, the father is still unreachable. Howd writes "before leaving we'd look at our work from level ground and I'd note how my rows bent against his, and he'd turn from me, silent."

The censure against emotional release is also apparent in the fine poem "Tin Woodsman," in which Howd reinterprets imagery from the *The Wizard of Oz*. The narrator addresses the Tin Woodsman, saying "I know how you feel, / a man squeezed into a tin can." The Tin Woodsman is unable to communicate, his "mouth locked on a word." In this state, the narrator speculates, it is understandable to become "nothing but head," to retreat into sterile intellectualism. Poignantly, the Tin Woodsman only wants one thing. "Your mind beats / A Heart / A Heart / A Heart / Heart," a desire the narrator appears to sympathize with. This clever poem, addressed to a generic "you," could very well refer to contemporary men.

Howd also addresses issues of love and loneliness. "Icarus & Elvis Are Alive and Well," is a whimsical fantasy speculating that Icarus and Elvis are alive today, living in a trailer in California. They are lovers, and although irritated with each

other and their cramped living quarters, they do care for each other. This caring is at once both a stop-gap measure against and a part of a sweet loneliness. Howd writes:

Every night they watch the sunset
and before they fall asleep,
listen to the ocean, then embrace,
making promises that the next day
will be different and their dreams
will be as one, and every morning
the sun rises and Icarus leaves
the bed to swim the ocean, alone.

In the final poem of *Blaming Icarus*, "Piéges," loneliness again sets the stage. The hero is a man who catches pigeons in snares, trains and tames them. To be a man is poignant. To have beauty and flight, "the gold tipped/ wings," one must catch it and keep it from others, one must possess it. But flight is freedom, and that can never be caught. Are modern men trying to thread a camel through the eye of the needle? And are the poets trying to fly with wax wings in a world of jet planes?

Howd, with a keen ear and sharp pen, catalogues the details involved in this dilemma. Men are taught that strength is silence, that beauty is to be possessed. The sun is beautiful, but cannot be looked at too closely. When you disobey your father's rules, your wings melt. You end up in the bay, sputtering. Or in a trailer park in California with your aging lover. Or, as Howd writes,

They call him
crazy
wasting his time,
surrounding himself
with the sky.

Howd has a talent for blending ancient myth and pop culture to address and evoke emotional states of being. It is this talent, along with an ease with language, that sets Howd apart from other young poets and makes *Blaming Icarus* well worth notice.



Bridget Meeds is a writer who lives in Ithaca, NY.

Western

continued from page 7

If so far this doesn't sound *New West* enough for you, that is because *Nothing But Blue Skies* is a town novel. Unlike some of McGuane's previous characters, Frank Copenhaver is not himself a cowboy but, interestingly enough, someone who has to employ cowboys as a matter of everyday business. This leads to some very different, very welcome, and ultimately rather un-New Western observations about "the cowboy mentality."

They're all like Jarrell —drunken, wife-beating, snoose-chewing geeks with big belt buckles and catfish mustaches. They spend all their time reading magazines about themselves. College professors drive out and tell them they're a dying breed. I hate them.

And if that sounds a little bitter, well, McGuane would seem to be saying, welcome to the bitterness of the region. For the characters of this novel, all of them townies in some sense or another, "The tone of the West had been set by the failure of the homesteads, not by the heroic cattle drives." Which is to say about the West, as one character says about Montanans, "These are the meanest white people in America."

We have come to expect just

such a cutting sense of place from reading McGuane. Who else among our major writers has written so convincingly about Michigan, Key West, California, Montana? In "Roping, from A to B," McGuane credits Kerouac with training the American writer in "the epic idea that the region was America," and not some "Pencilucky" where he just happened to have been born. On another page he criticizes Faulkner for locking his characters in "this morbid Cloud-Cuckoo-Land where everybody has mule trouble while the author rides up and down Sunset Strip in a convertible." Clearly McGuane fears the tag of regional writer, and yet, for all that, he writes about region in a way few people can touch.

In observations such as those above, McGuane cuts away the fat of Old West nostalgia to show us what lies closest to the bone of a New West torn between old-timers who have paid their dues and newcomers who care more for the spotted owl than the local economy. *Nothing But Blue Skies* is full of the sort of confrontations one finds in the West these days — confrontations about basic issues such as land and water and who has control over them. Among other things, the novel features what might just be the first comic portrayal of the Posse Comitatus.

But plot and local color aside, *Nothing But Blue Skies* would not be

a complete McGuane novel without the sort of virtuoso description my friend the rodeo clown has come to expect. With McGuane, such description telescopes *place* into an act lovingly done: riding a cutting horse into a herd of cattle, for example, or sailing a boat in the Florida Keys, or, more and more, fly fishing some quick little mountain stream. McGuane appeals to the aficionado in each of us.

What, then, does one *do* when living among the meanest white people in America without the woman one loves? One gets drunk and throws away money, to be sure. One also romanticizes one's youth. But beyond that? *One goes fishing.*

The line straightened and fell, and the bright speck of fly soared on the current. It lifted into the air again, then returned to teeter along the quick water on its hackles until it disappeared down a small suction hole, and the trout was tight, vaulting high over the water again and again. The rod made a live arc in Frank's hand, and in a minute the fish splashed in the shallows at his feet. He grasped the fly and the trout wriggled free. Frank let out a deep sigh and looked down the meander of wild water; it spiraled away forever.

This is not the point to jump in and start talking about fishing and redemption the way one would be

tempted to do reading, say, *Pere Hemingway*. You can take it or leave it, as far as the book as a whole is concerned. And when another of this novel's middle-aged characters comes right out and says it — "I guess that if we didn't have trout fishing, there'd be nothing you would really call pure in our lives at all"—the effect is to throw a question mark up after the whole concept. My my, one thinks, these boys really are mid-stream.

In the end, it is astonishing to think how much of what is in McGuane is there is simply to be enjoyed. Dialogue, for example. Picture our man Frank standing with a ranch foreman, each of them with a foot thrown up on a truck bumper.

"When's your girl finish school?" Bob asked.

"Two more years."

"She's at Missoula?"

"At Missoula."

"She got a boyfriend?"

"She did. I hesitate to tell you this, but he had a gold ring in his nose."

"Aw, come on."

"I ain't a-shitting you..."

This is McGuane with his cowboy hat on; it's big and well broken in, but not by any means the only hat he can wear.

McGuane's major strengths are his versatility—all these different things a la carte—and the lean

power of his prose style. His novels are tough in voice and fragile in design. Try too hard to put the different strands of his writing together and you start sounding like an undergraduate attempting to fake an English honors thesis. *McGuane uses sailing as an extended metaphor for the voyaging self; cowboying is an existential test of one's capacity for loneliness and "trouble"; fly fishing in Montana is "about" redemption, etc.* Such formulations, one decides, are both too much and too little to ask of Thomas McGuane.

McGuane has never been as good at endings as he is at beginnings, typically reserving that space for one more statement about how the father-son relationship determines all; but *Nothing But Blue Skies* is an exception. Here there is a statement about children, and how bringing them up causes this sadness, almost as if your life is telling you you're born to die, but how, in the end, this lonesome sadness is really a sign of love.

It's not a great ending, but somehow, taking into account what has come before, it seems a little like a small step forward; if not for a whole generation, then at least for Thomas McGuane.

✦

Robert Rebein is a writer who lives in Buffalo, NY.

Land

continued from page 3

earth, because we are part of a very small percentage of the earth's population which consumes a majority of its resources. Another step is to learn from native cultures. This

conference provided a start in that direction. That the need for such opportunities is recognized, was indicated by the conference attendance; while 250 participants were expected, over 500 attended and close to 1,000 came to hear Vine Deloria, Jr.'s keynote address.

Deloria warned that the economic and spiritual contradictions of mainstream society may lead to a false identification with native cultures, wherein guilty whites sentimentalize rituals and ways of living that for Indians are everyday necessities, beyond admiration or

criticism. Acknowledging his fear that successful struggles to save sacred places would result in supporters from the non-Indian community overrunning them, Deloria urged us to respect Native American religions without feeling we must become part of them, and to work

together with native people to protect the sacred earth and insure religious freedom for all

✦

Ruth Yarrow is a writer who lives in Ithaca, NY.

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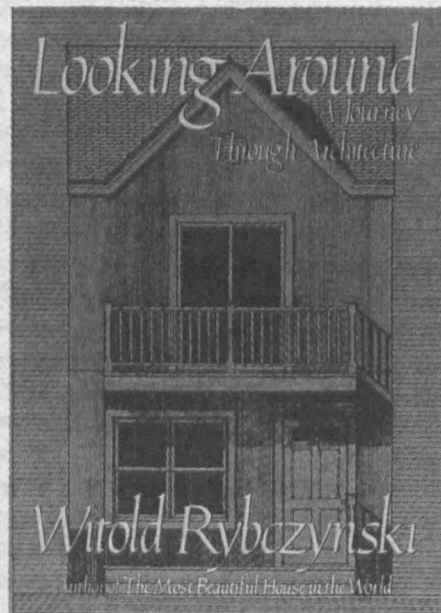


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Inventing the Essay

Robert Hill

At this time of year, in a bleak Bordelais autumn exactly four centuries ago, Montaigne expired in the act of receiving his final mass. Four hundred years later, there is very little left unsaid or unwritten about his intellectual modesty, his easy humanity, his quietly searching prose style. In commemoration of that quatercentenary, Penguin/Allen Lane has published M.A. Screech's new translation, *Michel de Montaigne: The Essays*. This is the first translation of Montaigne's *Essays* since Donald Frame's definitive and scholarly 1957 standard. And so, in that spirit of Montaignesque modesty, some comments are timely as a reminder of the man whose only method was to live as well as he knew how.

One of his more curious essays, one frequently collected in selections and anthologies, is entitled "Of Cannibals." It was written around 1578 and collected in the first book of his essays published in 1580. It belongs to that period usually called his stoical period. This essay is interesting here not for its skepticism, but for the fact that it is a textbook case of Montaigne's typical method (or lack of it) in writing his essays; and because in the essay itself he states explicitly, speaking in praise of a simple-minded witness, the principles of asseveration and canons of evidence he himself espouses in the body of his writings. So it is a bit of a primer on the topic at hand, which for us is Montaigne, and which for Montaigne was our tenuous apprehension of truth.

His apparent subject is the "barbarian" population of the newly discovered country of Brazil, and predictably enough his point is a wryly skeptical one—that these peoples in their warfare and in their domestic society demonstrate virtues quite different from, and arguably better than those moral qualities instanced in his own 16th-century European contemporaries. The tone, anticipating as it does the sociological sentimentalities of Rousseau, is familiar enough to anyone with a cursory acquaintance of these writings, nor is his conclusion any longer surprising. His choice of subject demonstrates the catholic interest he took in the world from which he had lately sequestered himself. "There may be seen in several places,

including my own house," he reports with all the satisfaction of a worldly collector of exotica, "specimens of their beds, of their ropes, of their wooden swords and the bracelets with which they cover their wrists in combats...."

What Montaigne does here, as he does characteristically, is to take the putative topic of the essay as an excuse for reflecting on nearly anything that comes into his mind, no matter how remote or elaborate the train of association proves to be. He introduces the notion of barbarism by citing, half the globe and twenty centuries away from Brazil, the observations of Pyrrhus and of Philip of Macedon when first they espied the orderly encampments of the barbarous Romans. From here he wanders off into leisurely disquisitions on the mythical kingdom of Atlantis and of an equally suspect colony of Carthage in a now lost world; on the probable extent of the newly discovered hemisphere; on the movements of land masses due to "the Flood"; and on the action of the Dordogne in changing courses and building new deposits of land in the sea, and of the sea in reconquering the land behind its shifting dunes. There is no telling where his thoughts will take him, nor is there ever any requirement that his musings be germane. Germane to what? he might ask, and fairly enough.

The notion of barbarism he takes as an occasion to reflect upon the relativity of truth itself: "It seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in." And thence to a discussion of the relative merits of the artificial and the natural, the beautiful and the imperfect. He mingles these reflections with little moments of slightly peevish sanctimony ("I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own"), or of good humor ("The whole day," he tells us approvingly of cannibal existence along the Amazon, "is spent in dancing."). And thence to instances of cannibalism among the ancient Gauls (justified after some fashion as a brave measure of resistance to besieging Romans), and of the medical applications of human flesh.

His examples reflect his range of interest and his extensive reading among the texts of ancient writers. But the use to which he puts these particulars is imposing—how he

chisels away at prevailing human pretensions and delusions, how he lays bare his own misgivings and his personal transgressions upon that deliberate intellectual caution he has adopted. Even when he takes a peevish tone with his readers, his fellow humans, he never exempts himself from its admonishing force. A large part of the charm of his method lies in its desultory casualness and its apparent lack of calculation.

His information about these Brazilians, he says, comes from a man whom he once had in his employ. In describing this fellow's credentials as a witness, and in the space he devotes to such a seemingly incidental matter, the essayist belies the fact that he is also here

you things as they are, but bend and disguise them according to the way they have seen them; and to give credence to their judgment and attract you to it, they are prone to add something to their matter, to stretch it out and amplify it. We need a man, either very honest, or so simple that he has not the stuff to build up false inventions and give them plausibility; and wedded to no theory....

We ought to have topographers who would give us an exact account of the places where they have been. But because they have over us the advantage of having seen Palestine, they want to enjoy the privilege of telling us news about all the rest of the world. I would like everyone to write what he knows, and as much as

phenomenology of thought as he muses, reverses himself, changes his mind, notes his lapses of virtue or faith or resolution. He speaks only about those Palestines he has seen with his own eyes (and he saw plenty during a life of travel and diplomacy). But he never pretends to any further special knowledge; he never, for all his humaneness, indulges in that misguided human penchant for speculation, nor ever claims to know more than what everybody knows. Even his curious account of something he has not seen himself is proffered only after the witness has been assayed by the essayist, and his credentials have been clearly laid out.

Montaigne could not splinter the larger and recurring chords of his thought into fine sparkling subtleties, as Mozart could dissolve his musical chords into a play of discrete notes. He moves slowly at times, so that often we do not realize until later that at a certain point he has reversed his field upon us in the course of a few paragraphs. Suddenly we discover that, like a fox, he is headed through his own undergrowth in the other direction. So he argues, with some tincture of sanctimony, that the cannibals of Brazil display finer virtues in a more eminent degree than do his own compatriots. But that reflection is not, for Montaigne, an avenue into the examination of primitive culture so much as it is an excuse to consider again the moral questions to be discerned in his favorite examples. There are betters to be found, even among our own forebears, and there always have been. We have their example, he reminds us, let us consider it. Every reflection, it seems, brings him back to assert his admiration of the characters of the classical world as models of humanity, of true wisdom, of moral excellence, and, most of all, as the fit objects of serious reflection. But it is, in the end, a cautious admiration.

It would not be in keeping with the spirit of Montaigne's own writings to lapse into a strictly polemical voice here, but it bears mention that his principled divorce from any theory serves as a salutary countervailing to the moral dogmatism that gives much of the tone to the current politicization of the university. It is a pardonable shortcoming in his education that it consisted largely in a diet of Greek and

see *Essay*, page 15



Illustration: Milly Acharya

delivering his manifesto on his own character, and declaring what it is in that character that lends his inconclusions their weight and their engagement with whatever we can grasp of certainty. He writes, both of his man as sound witness, and of himself as thinker:

This man I had was a simple, crude fellow—a character fit to bear true witness; for clever people observe more things and more curiously, but they interpret them; and to lend weight and conviction to their interpretation, they cannot help altering history a little. They never show

he knows, not only in this, but in all other subjects; for a man may have some special knowledge and experience of a river or a fountain, who in other matters knows only what everybody knows. However, to circulate this little scrap of knowledge, he will undertake to write the whole of physics. From this vice spring many great abuses.

Montaigne is the careful, unpretentious topographer of his own mental life. He fascinates us with what little he lays claim to know and what he confesses not to know, with his careful

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Master

continued from page 2
context in his stories, and so he also misses the larger, more mythical dimension of James's fiction.

When the hero of *The American* refuses to take revenge on the corrupt Bellegardes who have injured him, for example, Kaplan sees it as "a fantasy of forgiveness deeply embedded in James's commitment to his family's view of him as 'the angelic Harry.'" Perhaps, but James saw his hero in the light of the myth of Nature's Nobleman, a theme "deeply embedded" not in Henry's psyche but in the legend of Benjamin Franklin, who is mentioned twice in James's novel, in Cooper's mythmaking about Natty Bumppo, and in the recurring examples of our characteristically American Westerns and private-eye movies, whose heroes have a stubborn code of moral integrity in spite of the corruption that surrounds them.

Kaplan rightly says about James that "the world with which he had most communication was the world of his imagination." Too much of the time, however, in this biography James's imagination is either reduced to a repressed psychological one, or subordinated to mundane matters of detail about James's physical sufferings or gossipy de-

tails about his mind-bogglingly frequent travels and dinings out with fashionable people. Kaplan calls his last chapter the "imperial eagle," but it is mostly about James's nervous breakdown in 1910 and his two later strokes. The great bird with its wings clipped looks more like an English sparrow, fallen out of its nest. It is the problem of psychological biography to avoid suffocating the agent and agency in the passivity of the suffering patient.

What is most contemporary and convincing about this biography, however, is its subtext, a preoccupation with "family values." This buzzword of the Republican campaign is mainly a transparent political expedient, as it was not when Senator Moynihan courageously raised the issue in a reformist spirit many years ago. James never used the phrase, but Kaplan notes that James as a child had a strong loyalty to an extended family, "a warm feeling for aunts and uncles and especially cousins."

It is remarkable how significant the James family was for its members, both luminously for the better and calamitously for the worse. Two geniuses emerged, though badly wounded by the scars of their struggle against a benevolent, intellectually vigorous, cranky, unwordly, crippled, and tyrannous Victorian father. Two other brothers, Wilkie

and Robertson, lived broken and ineffective lives, disabled by war, drink, bad judgment, and failure; and one articulate but severely repressed daughter lived out her mature life in bedridden, hysterical paralysis. Not at all the home life piously envisaged by our political propagandists.

Kaplan acutely observes that James was fascinated with the orphaned daughters of his aunt because "freedom, romance, literature, an alternative world in which the choices were his" could be imagined in orphanhood, as they were in Dickens' David Copperfield. It is remarkable, nevertheless, how faithful in his fashion Henry was to solidarity with his family, especially when its members were in serious trouble. He generously took care emotionally and financially of a brother and a sister who badly needed help, even when he was himself, as he often was, economically hard-pressed. Typically, when William wrote his long eloquent letter about his intellectual debt to his father, it was Henry who went to the grave in Cambridge and read it aloud to the spirit of the buried father.

Kaplan wants to correct William's belief that Henry was "a native of the James family, and has no other country," on the ground that there was "no such unitary en-

tity." Nevertheless, Kaplan's account vividly proves that for Henry the James family was a demanding reality. William's wife Alice understood Henry James very well. As Kaplan notes, she insisted that he would "want to be reunited with William and Alice, with his beloved mother and his extraordinary father." She took his ashes back to America to be buried in the family plot at the Mount Auburn Cemetery.

Henry James could have had this admirable sense of family solidarity, however, even if he had never written a thing. What defines him best is his heroic artistic ambition: "I shall have been a failure unless I do something great!" His remarkably productive literary life was a convincing demonstration that he had done it. His ambition found expression, even after he suffered a stroke, in a fantasized vision of himself as Napoleon, giving orders to redecorate the Louvre, where the crown jewels are kept in the Gallery of Apollo, and it was the setting of one of his most highly charged nightmares, the dream of the Louvre.

The subtle resonances among his Napoleonic fantasy, his nightmare, his emotional investment in the delusory dream of material success in the theater, his envy of his friend Robert Louis Stevenson's success with *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and his

nostalgic feeling for the old New York of his childhood, as expressed in *The American Scene*, are all richly orchestrated in his psychological ghost story, "The Jolly Corner." (It has been made into a TV movie and the subject of a set of remarkable contemporary drawings.) It is surprising in a biographer as psychologically curious as Kaplan that he writes only two sentences about the story. One can appreciate Hawthorne's sympathy with Shakespeare's curse on those who would biographically stir his bones, but if one is going to do it at all, one should have a better feeling for the places where the soil is rich.

It would be churlish not to end on a more positive note in gratitude for the welcome gift in the book of an inset album of thirty-two pages of superb photographs taken of the James family and some of Henry's friends, both male and female. Whether it is worth the price of admission is for the reader to decide.

✦

Cushing Strout is Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters, Emeritus, at Cornell University. His most recent book is Making American Tradition: Vision and Revision from Ben Franklin to Alice Walker.

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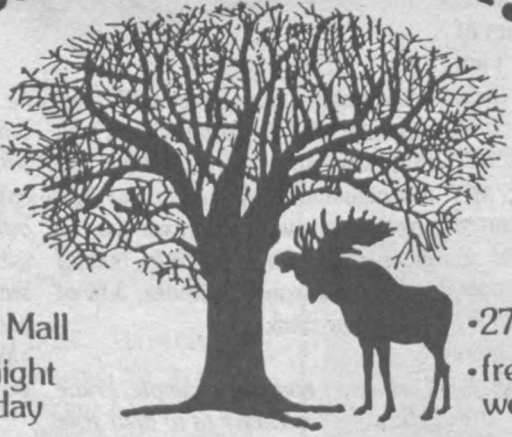
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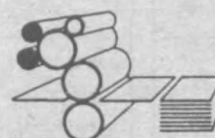
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The Genealogy of Punk

Paul Downes

ENGLAND'S DREAMING: ANARCHY, SEX PISTOLS, PUNK ROCK, AND BEYOND

Jon Savage
St. Martin's Press,
\$27.50, 602 pp.

The problem with writing the history of a revolution is that it is such an un-revolutionary thing to do. If the punk revolution, as the blurb on *England's Dreaming* puts it, "demolished British cultural life on all levels and erased the collective memory of the nation," then surely the historian of punk is the counter-revolutionary *par excellence*. Hence punk critics from Dick Hebdige to Greil Marcus have cultivated a prose style that smacks of apology for its seriousness even if it ends up sounding more academic than ever. Jon Savage, on the other hand, presents us with an unashamedly prosaic and carefully documented history of the Sex Pistols which is finally more readable and more informative than any comparable history of the punk phenomenon. Nevertheless, it still leaves one asking after the politics of this particular revolution. If Savage shows that it is possible to give a conventional historical account of the Sex Pistols, he also shows how such accounts are apt to demystify their objects of fascination. Trying to make sense of the Sex Pistols, Savage can't avoid a confrontation with their constitutive nonsense.

England's Dreaming is not only the most thorough biographical account of the Sex Pistols yet to appear. It is also a record of a relatively recent period of British (and to a lesser extent American) social history. In the same year, 1975, Margaret Thatcher was elected leader of the Conservative Party and nineteen-year-old John Lydon accepted an invitation from Malcolm McLaren to audition for the Sex Pistols. Savage (who produced one of the first punk fanzines and went on to write for the *New Musical Express* and *The Face*) punctuates his scrupulous history of the formation and emergence of the Pistols with references to the collapse of the English Labor party in the late '70s, the severe economic decline that produced large-scale youth unemployment, and the rise of the

Conservative government on a wave of reactionary traditionalism and patriotism. The Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in 1977 was the occasion for widespread national self-celebration of the most nostalgic kind, but for Savage it marked perhaps the most highly-charged moment of punk's short existence. "What was being celebrated," he writes,

was an edited, English version of what it was to be British. The United Kingdom was not only bereft of Empire but also divided within itself: Welsh and Scottish nationalism were at a peak, while the Civil War in Northern Ireland had spread onto the mainland with the post-1974 IRA campaigns. England itself was becoming ungovernable, but the Queen's speech contained the sentence, "The Commonwealth can point the way for mankind."

The Sex Pistols appeared with all the force of a hand-grenade tossed into an arrangement of gladioli.

"God Save the Queen," the group's second single, survived multiple attempts to prevent its release and availability and by the time of the Jubilee weekend it had sold 150,000 copies. On June 7th, McLaren arranged for the Pistols to play on a boat (the *Queen Elizabeth*!) that would sail down the Thames as "a mocking precursor to the Queen's own river progress through London on the 9th." Savage, who was on the boat that night, retells the events via one of many personal diary entries that are included in *England's Dreaming*:

7.6.77: the Sex Pistols gather themselves onto what passes for the stage.... The weather's lousy... The boat is full of people staring at each other. The group look fed up and everybody else is paranoid—a state encouraged by the amphetamine sulphate which the sycophants are lining out in the bar....

The Sex Pistols play for their lives. Rotten pours all his resentments, his frustration, his claustrophobia into a cauldron of rage that turns this petty piece of theatre into something massive. From our vantage point a few feet away, the world is reduced to a pair of glassy eyes and a snarling mouth, framed by red spikes....

These diary entries serve to enclose most of Savage's "fan" sensibility and thus keep it from overshadowing the historiographical project. Unlike Marcus, for example, Jon Savage's prose rarely attempts to share the stage with the performers or the events he documents.

England's Dreaming is a rare example in its field of what Simon Frith calls "dogged empiricism." The book begins with a lengthy biographical study of Malcolm

their criminal catalogue illustrates the sort of pop that was attractive to working-class males in 1973. It constituted a polarity between the lads' rock of Rod Stewart, with or without the Faces, Gary Glitter's terrace chants and the sexually ambiguous hard rock of David Bowie and Roxy Music. The Faces showed that Rock could include good-humoured camaraderie, while, beneath their luresheen, David Bowie and Roxy Music gave pride of place to ideas.



Photograph: ©Barry Plummer

Sex Pistols in May 1977:

(left to right) Sid Vicious, Steve Jones, John Lydon and Paul Cook.

McLaren, punk's renaissance man (and most recently a producer of commercials for Nike and Coke), followed by shorter accounts of the pre-band lives of Steve Jones and Paul Cook. These biographies also serve to inform one of Savage's most important sub-themes in *England's Dreaming*, that of the musical genealogy of punk. Cook and Jones represent a very particular but hardly obscure musical inheritance. At fifteen, Steve Jones wanted to be Rod Stewart and he and Paul Cook would break into concert halls to see the Faces and the New York Dolls in the early '70s. In an even more literal sense, the fledgling Sex Pistols borrowed from their rock heroes by breaking into the homes of Keith Richards, Ronnie Woods, and Rod Stewart in order to steal coats, TVs, and guitars. The boys' "greatest coup" came in July 1973 when they broke into the Hammersmith Odeon the night before a David Bowie concert and came away with the whole PA system. As Savage writes,

Through Bowie and Roxy Music, Savage traces the Sex Pistols' connection to the Velvet Underground and the "tail-end of the sixties Warhol scene," Iggy Pop, the New York Dolls and Mott the Hoople. When he spoke at Cornell last year, Savage used the term "foppish violence" to describe a certain tradition of male rock performance that reached some sort of peak in early and mid-'70s "Glam" rock. Although the Pistols abandoned the garish sequins, make-up, and platform boots of Glam's heyday, something of the absurdity of Glam's style and the campiness of its rhythms continued to inform their finest moments. Listening again to "Holidays in the Sun" in the light of Savage's remarks, I am struck by the tempo: Cook's drumming is almost blasé despite the volume, the song's lyrical anger is perfectly out of sync with the lazy rock 'n' roll sweep of Jones' guitar. The Pistols are at their best when their petulance prevents them from becoming too

animated, too committed to their noise.

England's Dreaming is an exhaustive amalgamation of individual biographies, music industry history, sociological analysis, and of course pop genealogy. Savage supplements his central discussion of the Sex Pistols with accounts of a multitude of other (now largely forgotten) punk bands: Manchester's Buzzcocks, Newcastle's Penetration, the Slits, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Adverts, Subway Sect, and of course the Clash. He also returns again and again to the relationship between British and American punk. It was seeing the New York Dolls in 1974 that first turned Malcolm McLaren on to the idea of forming a new kind of rock group, and it was the energy of the CBGB's scene (the Ramones, Patti Smith, Television) that inspired him to put together the first hugely successful punk band.

These connections and influences are also masterfully charted in the book's extensive discography. Ranging from the soundtrack to the London stage version of "Oliver" ("one of the only LPs owned by McLaren") to 1989's "Anarchy in the Tekno House" by the Ecstasy Boys, Savage's annotated record of punk's influences and exemplars makes fascinating reading all by itself. It is here that we get one of the few references to black music in the form of an entry on reggae (1972-82). Unfortunately, Savage doesn't explain this inclusion in the discography. Claims have been made for the sociological conditions that threw working-class whites in certain London neighborhoods together with the Jamaican community, but Savage might have said a little more about the validity of any attempt to challenge the whiteness of punk. Similarly, the discography only serves to underline the masculinity of punk (indeed of rock in general) and thus to undermine Savage's half-hearted attempts to address the gender politics of punk. Patti Smith's monumental importance only serves to illuminate her isolation. Who even remembers the Slits, Kleenex, the Raincoats, Pauline Murray, Poly Styrene? Savage refers to the "bullying misogyny" of the Stranglers but sheepishly avoids commenting on the most obvious examples of Sex Pistols sexism.

Indeed the question of politics,

see *Punk*, page 16

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Poetry

continued from page 1

know where you are but in fundamental ways you don't. It's not as though a movie were going on in the mind, it's not as explicit as that. Painting is concerned with explicitness; it's palpable, it's there. There's something very elusive about writing; it's never there, it's always abstract.

HW: Archie Ammons says that the ultimate moment of poetry is when language reaches its own reticence, the point where it stops speaking. Is that related to what you mean by "elusiveness," the fundamental "not-there" quality of poetry?

MS: I think it's always not there, I don't think it reaches that point. I'm not sure what Archie Ammons means when he talks about language, when it's suddenly not there, as though at a certain point it self-immolates, or erases itself. Has that been part of your experience?

HW: I think I know at an emotional level what he means by reticence, but I'm not sure I understand him well enough. I think of what Marianne Moore means when she says modesty is a virtue; that you've got to have a sense of what you can't say.

MS: My feeling is that language doesn't erase itself; an erasure is what a poem performs on the physical world in which we live. A poem always strives for primacy, it always strives to rid itself of a precursor event, so that it can be a thing in the world alongside everything else, and not mere reportage, not after the fact of something else. That's why I'm a little disturbed by all the poems that follow paintings; they sort of give in to a secondary status that I don't think poems should have.

HW: What do you mean, "follow paintings?"

MS: Well, such poems describe something that exists, and they interpret it. Nevertheless, they keep referring to something else, something palpable beyond the painting. In some ways, a poem is its own referent, finally. Maybe that's when it reaches that stasis or silence, when it frees itself from the world, or from any previous event, when it's no longer responsible to anything else, only to itself.

HW: Is a poem that describes a painting any different, say, than a poem that describes a walk in the woods?

MS: Yes, a walk in the woods is something we do in life, a painting is

something that's made, its already derived from an experience, so you see the poem would be twice removed.

HW: So a painting is not an event in itself, but a sort of meta-event?

MS: Well, the painting is both, it's about something and it's also clearly about itself. If a poet treats a painting not as art but as a part of the world, if he is not willing to distinguish between experiences he has as a human being between lunch, breakfast, and dinner and looking at paintings, then I think he stands a better chance of dealing with the painting. It depends on how easily absorbed the painting is.

This is probably better written about than talked about.

HW: OK. One thing I'd like to know about is the job of being Poet Laureate. You were the Poet Laureate of the United States for 1990. What does a Poet Laureate do?

MS: He answers a lot of mail that comes to the Library of Congress.

HW: Letters about poetry?

MS: Oh yeah, letters about, "am I any good, is my child any good, these are sample poems." You give many interviews, people respond to the interviews, they say, "I don't agree with what you said." When I said something about how I wouldn't write about the President's dog, Millie, I got lots of threatening letters from veterinarians, saying I didn't deserve to be a poet, I "had no humanity."

HW: Is it any part of the Poet Laureate's job to write poems?

MS: No. I was never asked to write a poem, although I never asked to, either. My predecessor, the late Howard Nemerov, wanted desperately to write public poems. Since being Poet Laureate, however, I have written poems on demand; one four-line poem is going to be carved in granite running around the base of the federal courthouse in Newark, New Jersey. It has a simple message and it's rhymed and metered; it's nothing that the public, upon seeing it, won't immediately understand.

HW: Who decides who gets to be Poet Laureate?

MS: The Library of Congress; the culture people there, the librarian himself, and maybe they ask other outside people for their opinions. Sometimes the poet in office at that time has input, but I don't think Howard Nemerov was consulted about me; I have my doubts.

HW: How is the Poet Laureate post funded?

MS: It's funded by a private foundation; it's a fund given to the Library. I can't remember the name of

it. It's not with taxpayer dollars; I never felt that I had any responsibility to the taxpayer.

HW: I'd like to know a few things about your new book, *Dark Harbor*, which I assume you worked on during that time.

MS: No, I wasn't able to write anything during the time I was Poet Laureate; I wrote two lectures, and that was it. Nothing to do with poetry. I waited until I got back to Salt Lake City and wrote a few poems and then, in the middle of the summer, upon getting back here, I started in on this poem and the pages just accumulated. I didn't type it up, and by mid-November I got tired of

the time I got to page fifteen or so I began flagging and I got very depressed; I thought "Gee, is this all I have?", but then I perked up and kept going. I hope that when I write another long poem it will be longer because I like that absorption, that continuous life that a long poem supplies. When you think of our two great poets of the moment, with no disrespect to other poets writing, Ashbery and Merrill, they've been able to write long poems. They have tremendous verbal energy. Unless you write poems, I don't think you can understand how demanding it is to write something of that length. Poems are, as you know, actually

involved in some kinds of influence; it's overtly related to Dante, whom I think you're translating now, there are barely veiled references to Stevens, and often poems that take as their starting points Stevens' poems, there are quotations from Ashbery...

MS: Well, I had been reading Ashbery before. I owe my existence as a poet, I believe, to Wallace Stevens; he was the first modern poet I read and the one who has had the greatest influence on me. Dante I was merely reading to warm up for translating one canto; I can't consider myself his translator on the basis of that. You know, the poem really is indebted to Stevens more than anyone else. The Orphic strain in the poem is more Virgilian or Ovidian. That also borrows from *The Continuous Life*. The key poem for me from *The Continuous Life* is "Orpheus Alone," which was the generative poem as far as *Dark Harbor* goes.

HW: But does influence have some thematic function? Why be so direct about pointing out the precursors to your work in the work itself? For instance, Harold Bloom might say you're really covering up deeper, unnameable influences.

MS: That could be, but then the deeper influences have not been revealed, so I can't say who or what they are. My larger influences are undoubtedly my mother, my father, certain bottles of wine...

HW: But beyond the question of *who* your influences are, is there some reason to put their names, effectively, in the poem?

MS: Those are merely statements by other poets which have provoked thought. Just because I quote from them doesn't necessarily mean they're influences; I quote Ashbery whom I admire greatly, but I'm not really influenced by him. I'm merely giving credit, instead of just stealing it. Those poets I name in the poem are not necessarily influences; Wallace Stevens happens to be an influence. Wordsworth happened to be an influence, though I never believed nature to be worthy of emulation; I'm not crazy. I mean, Wordsworth was pre-Darwinian; nature is not really such a hot model. It's Wordsworth's cadences and revelations that matter to me; things like those glorious first hundred lines of Book Thirteen of the *Prelude*, so unspeakably grand. I can't just take it.

HW: I think most people have poets whom they would never argue were great poets, but whom they love

see *Poetry*, page 15

XXIX

The folded memory of our great and singular elevations,
The tragic slapping of vowels to produce tears,
The heavy golden grieving in our dreams,

Shaping the soul's solemn sounds on the edge of speech
That carry the fullness of intention and the emptiness
Of achievement are not quite the savage

Knowledge of ourselves that refuses to correct itself
But lumbers instead into formless affirmation,
Saying selfhood is hating Dad or wanting Mom,

Is being kissed by a reader somewhere, is about me
And all my minutes circulating around me like flies—
Me at my foulest, the song of me, me in the haunted

Woods of my own condition, a solitaire but never alone.
These are bad times. Idiots have stolen the moonlight.
They cast their shadowy pomp wherever they wish.

—From *Dark Harbor*
forthcoming in spring 1992

it and stopped. Then I went through it and started typing it up and throwing sections away; I had about eighty-seven sections which I gradually whittled down to forty-five. It was a great burst of energy; I was never as happy in my writing life as I was during those four months. That's why I'm eager to start another long poem.

HW: Did you set out to write a long poem?

MS: I set out to see how far I could go. I must say that reading John Ashbery's book, *Flow Chart*, overwhelmed me because of the energy it takes to write something that long. It's not all at the same level, some of it is very, very high, very grand and beautiful; but it is always good. I felt on the one hand challenged by the book, and on the other hand diminished by it. And I thought, "Do I have the energy to write a book-length poem?" I sat down, and by

quite concentrated and several hundred poems of concentrated writing is tiring.

HW: Your book is essentially a series of short lyrics which together form a long work. How do you think those parts, which can stand on their own, work together to form a long poem?

MS: They're related by themes; there are four or five themes that weave through the book. The theme of departure, the theme of arrival, being in Hades, the possibility that everyday life on our planet is a portion of Hades; all these things are connected. It's really the voice that connects the poem, a tonality that encompasses the whole thing. Also, the coming back of familiar images or situations that echo previous ones in the poem; the theme of water, connected to departure, for example.

HW: How do you think influence works in this poem? It's explicitly

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anyway. Do you have any of those?

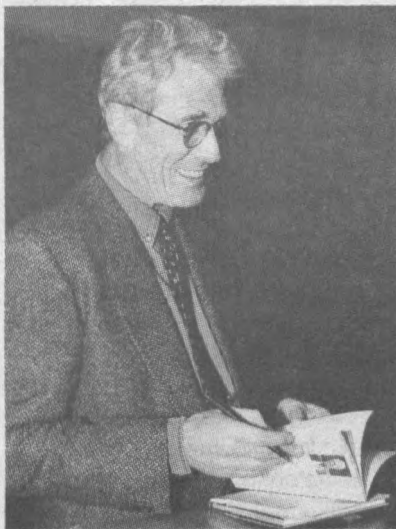
MS: Well, Edwin Muir. I love his poetry, I rate it very high, I believe it's overlooked. It's flawed in some ways, but it speaks to me, I suppose the way Thomas Lovell Beddoes speaks to Ashbery. Something like that. I don't know, that's one poet who comes to mind; the other poets who influence me are pretty great. I love the poems of Hardy; I'm not influenced by the shape of them, but their concerns influence me.

HW: I'm not really talking about influence, just who you love.

MS: Oh, I love Larkin, and I love Hardy, and Frost; these are poets of course who can't influence me because they write differently. Let's see; I love certain books, like *The Prelude*, which I read and read again.

HW: Is there something that's consistently good for you to read while you're writing?

MS: Well, I have certain tricks. There's a book by Hermann Broch called *The Death of Virgil*. It's a wonderful novel, and I think quite profound. I sort of sink into it and it forces me into another register; I find myself in a state of lyric sug-



Photograph: Kathy Morris

Mark Strand

gestibility, or something like that. I think reading Kafka also does it to me in a strange way. There are certain things I can look at and it happens. Samuel Beckett, oddly enough. The odd rhythm of his prose. He's very funny, but the repetitions, the redundancy, the joke that redundancy is; it sets up a curious rhythm, the over-explicitness of it. It has a clarifying effect for me.

HW: Do you have any superstitious practices related to your writing, things which probably don't matter

but you obey them anyway?

MS: No, whenever something strikes me I'm quick to seize the opportunity. When I'm working very hard I get very excited. I don't want to rush things, so I go downstairs and play solitaire to clear my mind; then I go back upstairs and continue. I play a lot of solitaire when I'm in the middle of working on something.

HW: What do you suppose the architecture in heaven looks like?

MS: I have no idea who designed the pearly gates, or who wrote the music that the angels sing. Has it been described anywhere?

HW: Yes, W.H. Auden says that's one thing he'd like to know about anyone before he talked to them about literature, is what they thought heaven was like. Then he goes on to say what he thinks about it.

MS: I don't believe in heaven; though as a literary idea one is free to believe in anything. I probably think of it as a kind of spotless, Washington, DC.

HW: One last thing I'd like to know is whether you have any phobias.

MS: No. None. I'm not afraid of bugs or storms, or walking across a field during a thunderstorm; it may be imprudent to do so, and I don't do it in the normal course of events, but

it's not something I'm afraid of doing. I'm repelled by a lot of things, but that doesn't mean a nameless, irrational fear of a lot of things. I have no phobias, but that doesn't mean I don't have taste.

HW: What are you working on now?

MS: I'm finishing this thing called "A Poet's Alphabet of Influence." It's a lecture I gave last summer at Breadloaf, that I've just redone so it can be published in a small press edition, and I'm finishing up my book on Edward Hopper. And then I'm going to begin another long poem.

In an interview with Larry Berger, October 18, 1992. What Mr. Ammons actually said is: "I have gone so far as to say that perfect healing is when reticence appears in a poem. When a poem has become complete and now silent, its motions have become still, but it exists whole and at that time one's feelings are released into the structure. I was once asked as Mt. Holyoke what was the essence of a poem, and I said 'reticence.' That is, when the words are healed of themselves."

Heather C. White is a writer who lives in Ithaca, NY.

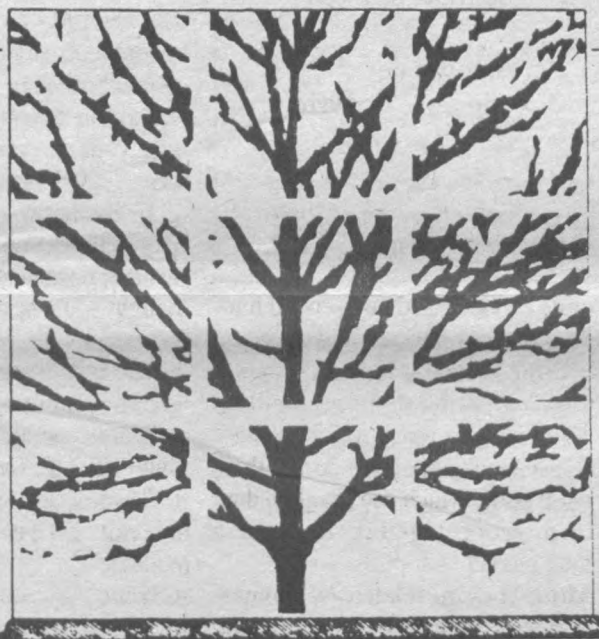
Essay

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Latin authors, ballasted by a few Catholic theologians of dubious intellect; pardonable for what he made of it, the excisions his judgment effected, the scope his reflections found, and the objects he found worthy of reflection. One large issue raised by Montaigne's life and writings is the place of disinterestedness in the life of the intellect. Is there, upon those who choose that life, the attendant obligation to remain disinterested, nondogmatic, to refuse to adhere to what cannot be known certainly?

For Montaigne, to be disinterested was never to be disengaged. He was one of those rare humans whose conduct imposes itself as a model ever afterwards upon those who choose a life of deliberated engagement. He always remains il giacinto, the literary counterpart of Da Vinci's famous feminine portrait, his face faintly lit as are his essays with that familiar cryptic smile. It is but one of his enduring graces.

Robert Hill is a writer who lives in Ithaca, NY.



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Punk

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whether it be of race, gender, or even class, is left curiously under-addressed in *England's Dreaming*. I say curiously because this is not a book that purports to be simply about the music. Right from the start, Savage attempts to link punk, via Malcolm McLaren and his graphic designer Jamie Reid, to the Paris uprisings of May 1968, the Situationist International art/politics collective and even further back to an anarchist/utopian tradition originating in the French Revolution and the British Gordon Riots of 1780. McLaren, we are told, was particularly taken by the Situationists' "cryptic" and "paradoxical" statements which he appropriated for his clothing (shirts printed with slogans like "Be reasonable/Demand the Impossible") and for Sex Pistols products (the poster for "Holidays in the Sun," like the song itself, took off from an SI reference to "cheap holidays in other people's misery"). But whatever may have been the specific grievances of the French revolutionaries, the Gordon rioters, the Paris students, or indeed the Situationists themselves, you would be hard-pressed to find any specifics in the politics of Malcolm McLaren.

McLaren's political awakening seems to have occurred while he was a student at Croyden Art School. In response to the Paris revolts, students at the college staged a sit-in and McLaren joined the protest. But all Savage's attempts to present this as a moment of charged political intensity come up against a ridiculous lack of substance. "It was a weekend picnic," he quotes Robin Scott as saying:

'I don't think Malcolm's intentions were any more serious either, because when it came to the crunch, having anything constructive to say or do, he had nothing to say. Indeed

when the opportunity arose to actually change the system, or do anything about the Croyden School of Art, he was gone, he fucked off.'

McLaren's next attempt at political action was even more laughable. Dressed as Santa Claus, he joined other members of King Mob (a spin-off of London Situationists) and stood in the toy department of a major London store handing out the store's toys to passing children. To escape the police, McLaren grabbed an "old lady" and walked through the store pretending to help her. It's hard not to sense some embarrassment in Savage's presentation of these pitiful episodes. After all, he eventually wants to contend that punk, very much McLaren's creation, was "the true voice of the present."

Punk was trafficking in taboos at the same time as it sought to illuminate and dramatize deep-seated contradictions with a sophisticated, ironic rhetoric. Unlike many historical avant-garde movements, it had the potential to enter the mass market and in November 1976, was poised to do so. But the mass market is notorious for simplifying complexities and steam-rolling irony and the idea of a youth movement with swastikas hitting 'the kids' was simply terrifying. Punk's

countdown to apocalypse suddenly seemed very dangerous.

If there is a "sophisticated, ironic rhetoric" to punk and to the Sex Pistols in particular, its hard to find it in the comments of the major actors. McLaren comes across as an energetic promoter of disruptive media events but his notions of disruption are ultimately quite crude. Sid Vicious was tirelessly self-destructive, Steve Jones played his guitar loud, drank lots of beer, and spent his spare time pursuing women like countless other "rock stars" before him, and Paul Cook seems to have contributed little more than a few predictable drum tracks to the history of pop music. What makes the Sex Pistols fascinating is the tension between their promise of radical political dissension and their resistance to any particular appropriation. This tension informed their best performances and it is to the credit of Jon Savage that the same tension remains to trouble this particular attempt to sum the band up.

If the Sex Pistols had any association to revolution, then, it was via an association to irresponsibility. It is perhaps comforting for us to remember the Sex Pistols as the ultimate expression of anti-Thatcherism, but in the end who can

really say what all those swastikas were doing? Certainly not the Pistols themselves. And what about "Bodies," the second track on their only official album? Has a more antipathetic song ever been written on the subject of a women's reproductive choice? The Sex Pistols may have triggered an explosion of punk imitators and admirers, but it is hard to find another band so politically uncommitted, so persistently unwilling to justify themselves. This is harder to appreciate now, when even the Red Hot Chile Peppers want you to Rock the Vote and Guns n' Roses have the audacity to appear at an AIDS benefit rally. Perhaps in the end the Sex Pistols will be remembered as the product of a certain luxury: the boredom of white boys, an aesthetics of nonchalance, petty violence, and political ignorance.

England's Dreaming tells the story of the Sex Pistols' comic tragedy with compelling attention to the almost daily twists of lurid success. The account of the American tour that finally breaks the band and sends Sid Vicious on his spiral to arrest and overdose is almost hilarious, almost frightening. One can hardly imagine a more pathetic nosedive into history.

Ultimately, Jon Savage remains a fan of the Sex Pistols even if he seems to be aware of the dangers of writing a fan's account. His history of the Sex Pistols is meticulous and his prose resists the temptation to mimic some kind of punk sensibility. Instead, by appealing to the somewhat pedantic protocols of scholarly biography, *England's Dreaming* succeeds in capturing what is, in Simon Frith's words, "central to the meaning of pop [though] difficult to convey in detached academic terms: its dependence on place and time." Punk rock will receive no finer obituary.

Paul Downes is a writer who lives in Ithaca, NY.

NYC

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Claw your way close to a rack, using the social finesse of a rabid raccoon. Grab something that appeals to you. Don't yank — everything is hooked up with those gold-colored cords that scream "MURDER! FIRE!" when they are disconnected. Now stand there, making a lot of noise of your own until one of the three sales people who has the key to the golden cord releases the garments. Make friends quickly. Ask his/her name. Compliment the hairdo, the earring(s). You've got to work faster than a hooker at a truck stop so that if you want something else, this person can be counted on. This little section does have one tiny dressing room, unshared. You may only use it for the designer clothing. There is no limit to how many garments you can take in, so you will soon be standing in a long line of women, each carrying a bundle large enough that simply unzipping the zippers will take a moon cycle. This is why you made friends with the sales person. You'll want to take everything on the rack with you into that dressing room, just in case, because you're not ever going to stand on that line again.

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Gunilla Feigenbaum is a writer who lives in New York City.



From *England's Dreaming*



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